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Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House
33 Richmond Hill
Bournemouth
Dorset BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Website: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk

Editor in Chief
Rick Porter

Compiled By
Ashley Day

Design
Stephen Williams

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RETRO


Dylan Cuthbert (Page 202)



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BEHIND THE SCENES

HALF-LIFE

Subtle and disturbing, slow-burning, terrifying and occasionally hilarious, Valve Software's Half-Life is one of the most influential videogames of all time. Crowbar in hand, games™ returns to the abandoned halls of Black Mesa to find out why

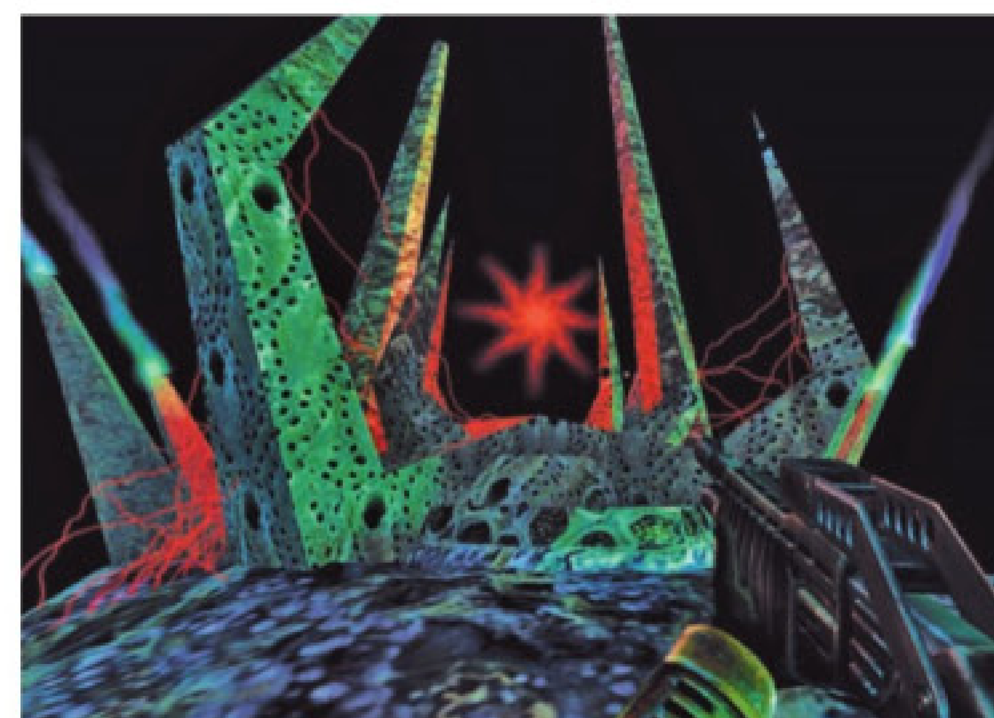
Released: 1998
Format: PC, PlayStation 2
Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Valve

KEY STAFF:
Gabe Newell
CEO
Marc Laidlaw
Writer
Ted Backman
Senior Artist
Ken Birdwell
AI Designer

IT COULD HAVE all gone so wrong. We know you hear that a lot in game retrospectives, but this is serious. Yes, *BioShock* could have been about zombies in a Nazi bunker, *Borderlands* could have looked like gruel, and *Tabula Rasa* might have featured butterfly-winged girly men fighting each other with books. (Then again, *Tabula Rasa* tanked, so maybe book-fighting girly men were the right way to go.) But *Half-Life* is more than just a game. It triggered a movement: a massive change not just in the way first-person shooters were made, but videogames as a whole. It set new standards for player immersion, narrative quality and combat AI, and opened the doors to modding in a more generous fashion than any other shooter had done before – in doing so, ultimately creating an unstoppable multiplayer phenomenon. In some ways, *Half-Life* is the most important game of the past two decades. And yet it might just have been a middling old *Quake* clone starring a guy called Ivan the Space Biker.

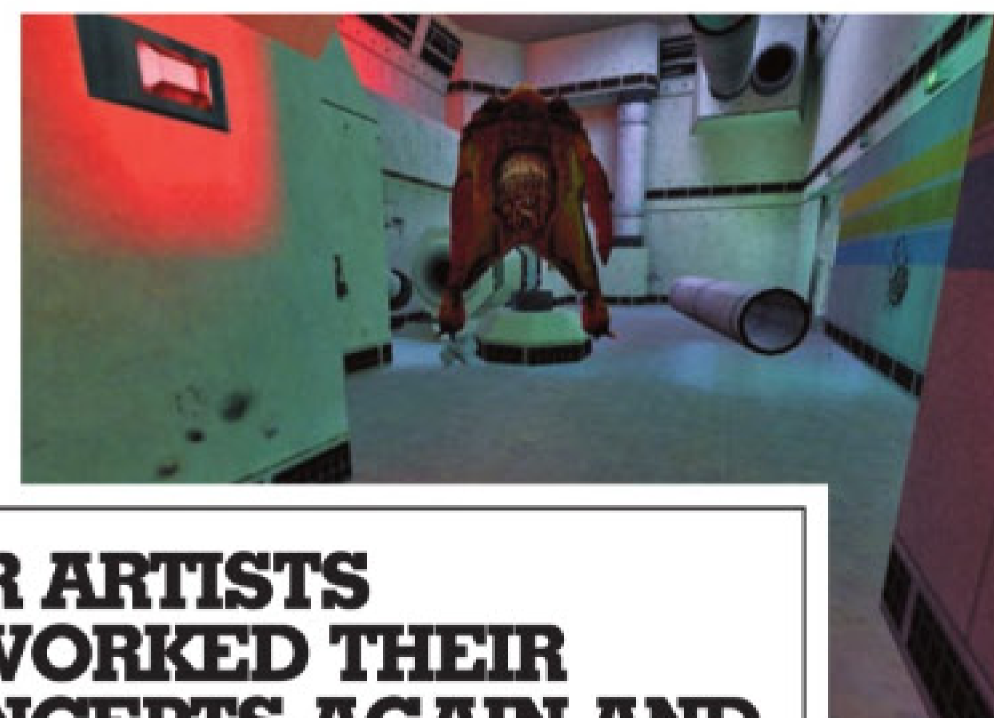
No, really. Ivan was a paunchy chap with a full beard and a flattop. He wore a bulky HEV suit and was, presumably, predisposed towards biking in or near space. One can only summon up that ever-mysterious *deus ex machina* known as 'the creative process' to justify how this blockily rendered slab of mid-Nineties cheese transformed into Gordon Freeman, the world's sexiest physicist, but there it is. Somewhere along the line, *Half-Life* went from embarrassing to exceptional. One of *Half-Life*'s designers, Marc Laidlaw, attempts to explain: "We didn't so much 'pick' the current image of Gordon as just naturally develop it. Our artists reworked their concepts again and again until they had something we liked, and Ivan was just one of those concepts." CONTINUED >.

OUR ARTISTS REWORKED THEIR CONCEPTS AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN



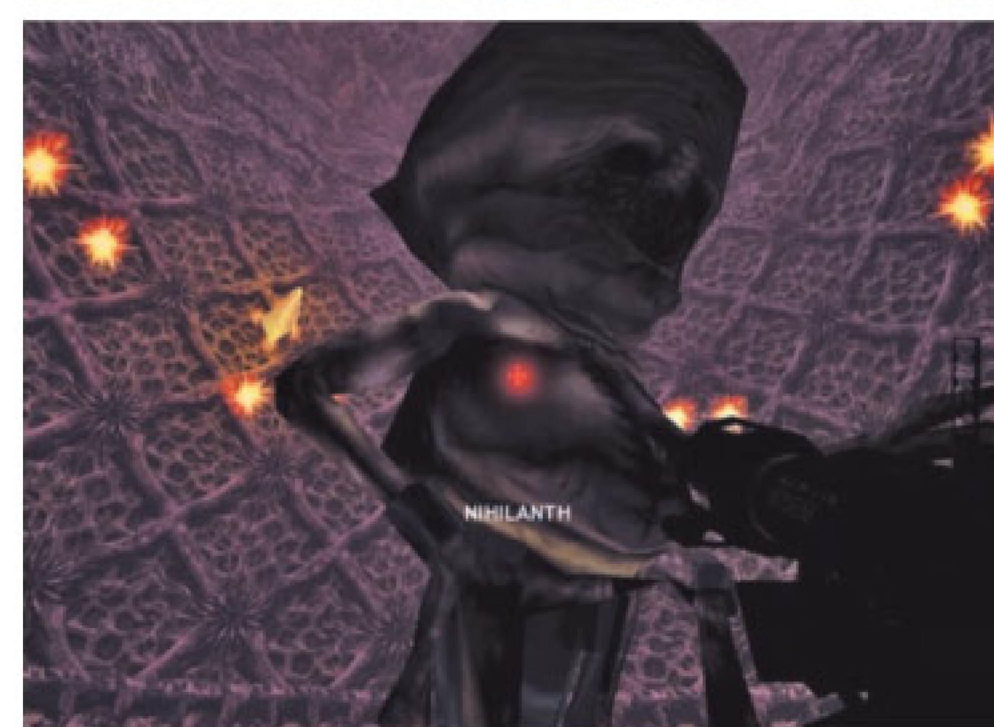


Despite its progressive gameplay, *Half-Life* still followed a couple of hackneyed gaming traditions.





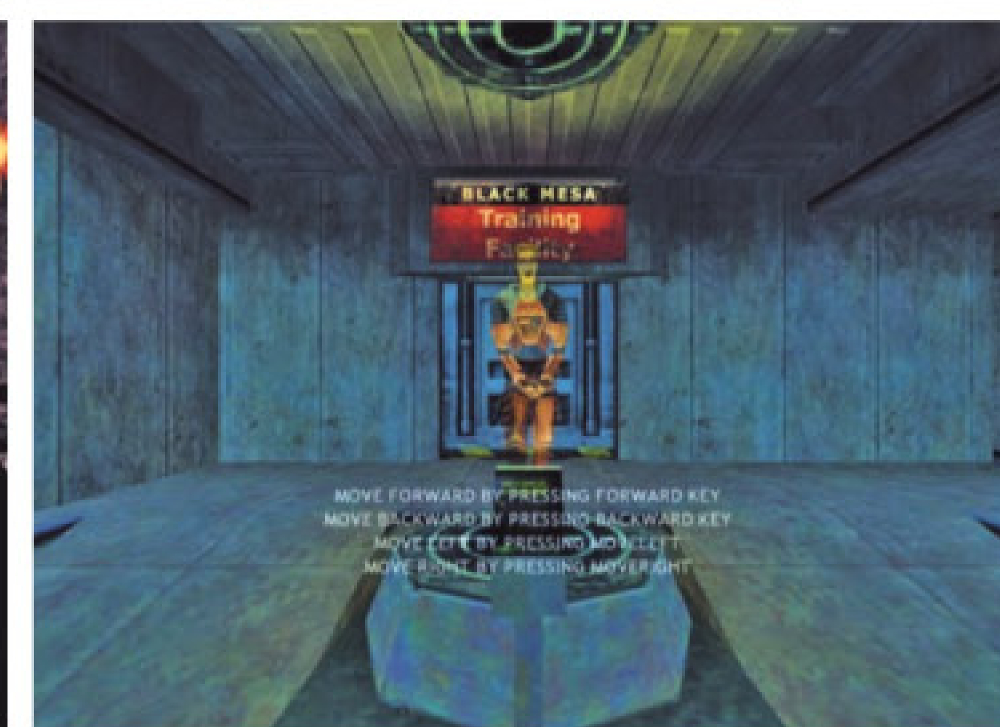




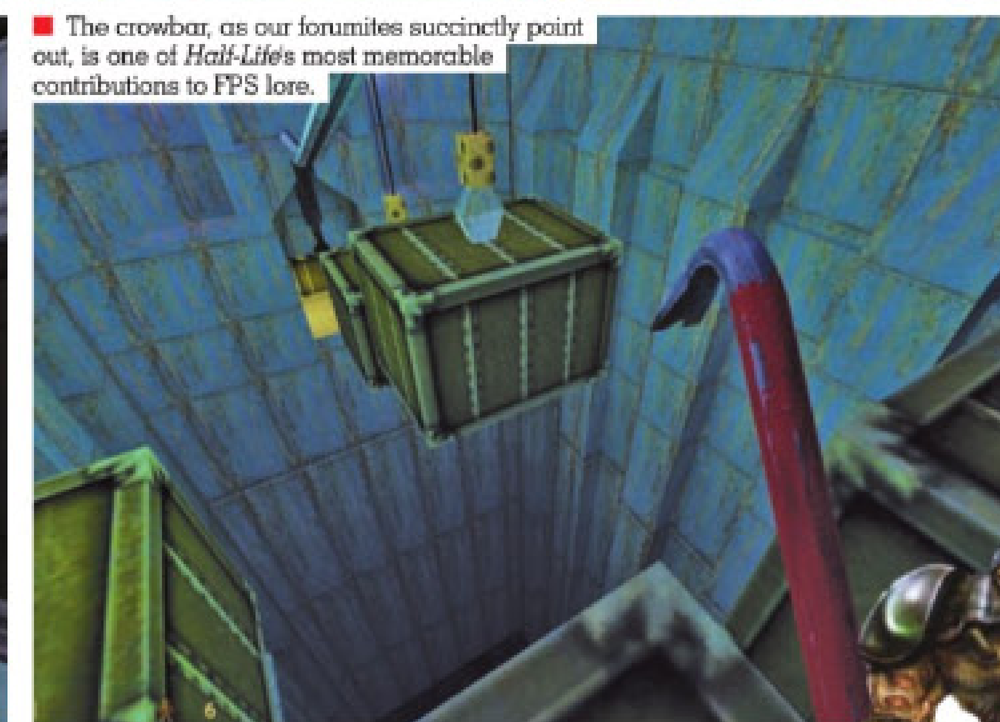





Though *Half-Life* evolved from the Quake engine, it moved the genre on much more than id's generic first-person shooter series ever did.






The crowbar, as our forumites succinctly point out, is one of *Half-Life*'s most memorable contributions to FPS lore.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: SWOOPER_D
My first experience of it all after the opening train ride was constantly bothering everyone with the talk button. Must have heard those same lines about 20 times each…

Posted by: BIG MEAN BUNNY
Whilst the game was an incredible epic, the real memories for me were finding two little mods called *Counter-Strike* and *Team Fortress*. I had recently had my appendix out and was off school. I ran up a three-figure 'dial-up' bill as I'd been playing it for hours a day when you still used to pay by the minute before 6pm.

Posted by: SHADOWMAN
The opening train ride seemed to last forever and when it finally ended I managed to fall off the platform and kill myself, meaning I had to sit through the thing again. Oh yeah, and the game going from amazing to frustrating the second I stepped onto the alien planet.

Posted by: KAR
I think it was the narrative that was so memorable. We take it for granted now, a shooter having a storyline, but think back to 1998. The heavy-hitter FPSs were *Unreal*, *Quake II* and *Jedi Knight*. *Unreal* and *Quake II* had loose plots that were there merely to provide a pretext for the action. *Jedi Knight* had a rich plot, but it was driven by pre-rendered cut-scenes and felt as if they were a reward for playing the game, not intrinsic to the game itself.

Posted by: SCOTSWAHEY
Crowbar.




Half-Life's alien species somehow managed to look indistinct and iconic at the same time. That's good design.

One World

One of *Half-Life's* innovations that receives very little commentary these days is the seamless world in which it takes place. Prior to Valve's debut game, shooters followed the environment model pioneered in platform games, where each 'level' was a self-contained, visually distinct world. In *Half-Life*, apart from the bit where you do genuinely visit another planet, the world is rolled out contiguously. And the only interruption the player has to this unprecedented realism is the odd pause and on-screen 'Loading' message. It had the effect of making the Black Mesa Research Facility feel like an actual, real-world location – a rather worrying concept, when you think about it.



Such is the nature of early concepts, we suppose: those undercooked, malformed designs that so often unfortunately get foisted upon the gaming public due to tight production schedules. Luckily, however, Valve was self-funded by Microsoft vet and CEO Gabe Newell, who was more than happy to let his company's labour of love grow into its full potential. This culminated in a major overhaul fairly late into development, when the Valve team took stock of what they were building and decided it didn't stand a chance against *Quake II* and associates. "The game was fairly close to completion," Laidlaw recalls, "and we looked at it and realised that if it were to be released, it would be completely lost in any number of competing products. So they decided to risk pushing the game's release back and do a complete redesign. We weren't beholden to a publisher holding the purse-strings. There were lots of other extremely talented and creative shooter developers out there at the time, though, but I think it just comes down to our own interests and talents. That's why it was different."

While we'd be quite surprised if you've never played *Half-Life*, there's always the chance that a recent frontal lobe injury has rendered you unable to recall precisely what was so unique about it. Shall we start with the tram ride? Prior to *Half-Life*, shooters were devoid of context: there wasn't any sensible reason given to excuse/explain the mass murder the game would necessitate. For instance, when designers on the original *Doom* pitched a sequence to John Carmack where the player could watch his fellow marines enjoying a game of cards before being eviscerated by cybernetic hellspawn, he replied that "story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important."

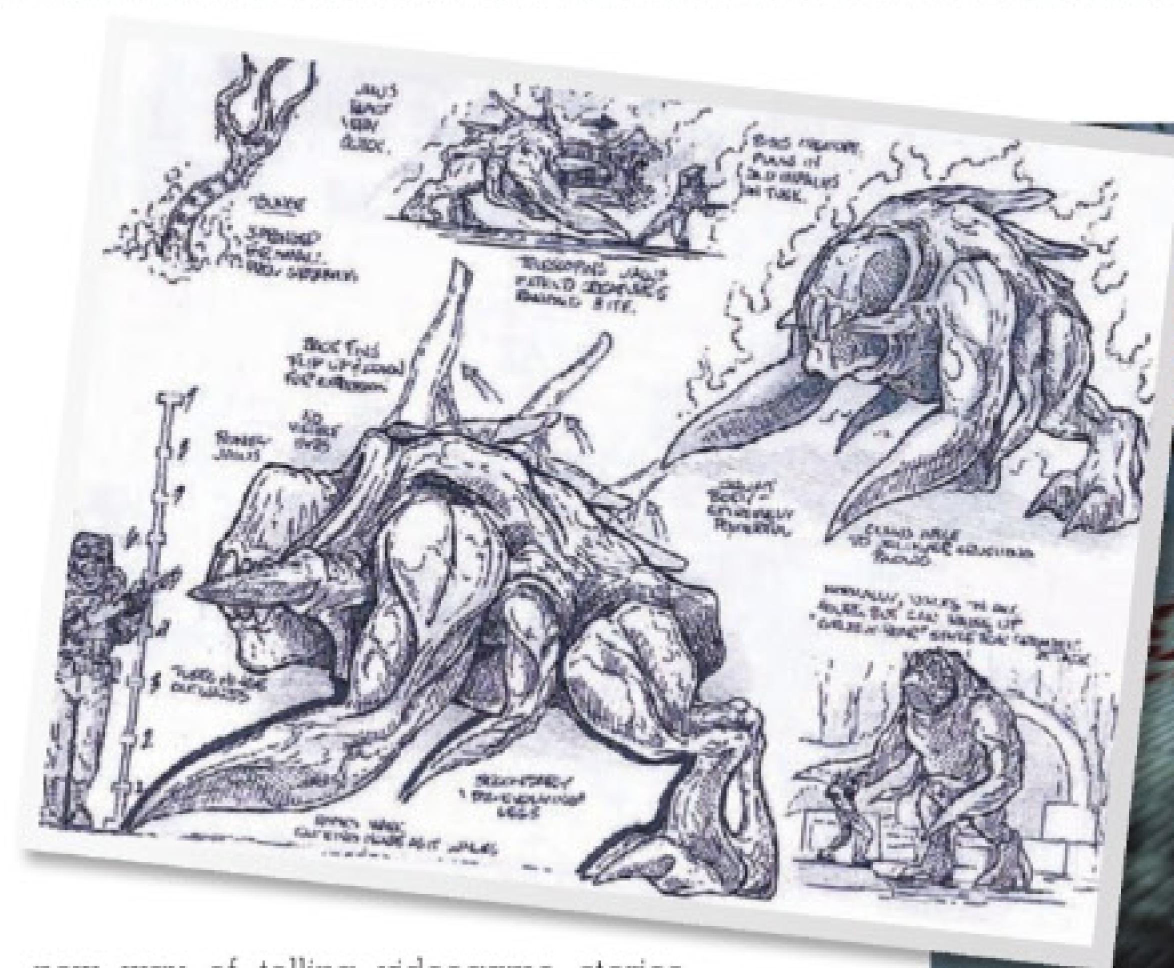
How, then, must Carmack have felt in those opening minutes of *Half-Life*, where the player is confined to a tiny tram car, unable to do anything but shift from seat to seat, take in the underground view and listen to that valium-voiced female announcer? And after that, a solid ten-to-fifteen minutes of pure, weapon-free exploration within the Black Mesa Research Facility, where you do battle with such monstrosities as malfunctioning vending machines and shrill whitecoats reminding you you're late for work? Back in 1998, this wasn't just heresy: this was completely unthinkable.

IN THOSE OPENING minutes, *Half-Life* turned its back on the masturbatory excesses of its contemporaries, and in doing so set the tone for the rest of the game (and for all shooters to come, other than maybe *Serious Sam*). Exposition, hitherto relegated to cut-scenes or walls of perfunctory text *à la Doom*, took place completely from the player's eyes. This had the effect of seamlessly integrating *Half-Life's* plot with its shooting; story wasn't treated as a necessary evil or a reward for 20 hours of mindless killing; rather, it was just as integral to the game as the gunplay. "It was a radical change," Laidlaw agrees. "I played *Quake II* while we were doing *Half-Life*, and, sure enough, it starts with the player making his way out of a wrecked spaceship, blaster in hand. So, starting a shooter without giving the player a weapon, and then making the player explore an area completely devoid of threats for up to an hour, just wasn't done in other shooters at the time. It made me feel that we were taking a huge risk, and that *Half-Life* would be very different to anything else out there. But if it worked, I knew the rewards would be huge. We were all big fans of the FPS. It was, at least at the time, my favourite type of game, and one that seemed as if it would get the biggest benefit from the integration of storytelling techniques. There was a general arrogant assumption that players of shooters didn't want and wouldn't care about a story; we just didn't believe this."

Of course, due to *Half-Life's* player-centric modus operandi, Valve was required to create an entirely new way of telling videogame stories. Because players were never saddled with two minutes of helpful pre-rendered dialogue warning them of the imminent alien security breach, or the arrival of the sadistic military unit flown in to clean it up, they relied on the frantic snippets of information that surviving Black Mesa scientists and security guards provided. *Half-Life*, thus, wasn't so much cinematic as realistic. It was the first game that felt genuinely real, albeit with added extraterrestrials and at a top-secret research facility into which us Cro-Magnon hominids could never dream of being invited. "For a lot of people," Laidlaw, who was the story's chief architect, notes, "Black Mesa was a real place. The story actually stemmed from our desire to make coherent a large amount of in-game levels, which we really did design with gameplay in mind. The levels were all quite different, though, so the story needed to give voice to a team of level designers who'd never worked together before and would be fairly independent of each other whilst still having a common goal in mind.

STARTING A SHOOTER WITHOUT GIVING THE PLAYER A WEAPON JUST WASN'T DONE


An early concept design for Gordon Freeman. Thank God his design has been refined over the years since his conception.





Years of taking grenades from GoldenEye's scientists has left us feeling a little bitter.


MARC LAIDLAW
Writer

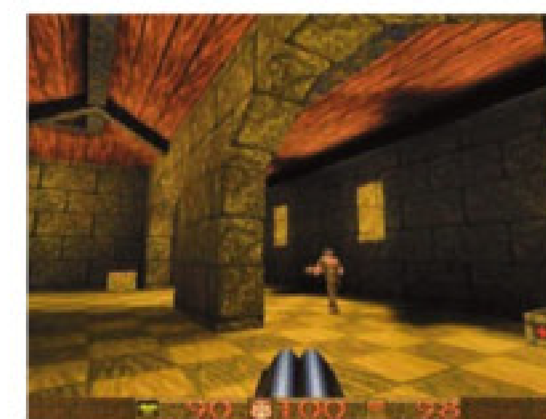
"AFTER A WHILE, when the levels were getting closer to their finished state, we started fleshing out the story. But we really had one goal in mind from the beginning – to have as little obvious explanation in the game as was possible. Players had to be the detectives, putting the different pieces together themselves. From what we've seen over the years, Black Mesa made a huge impression on a generation of players as a result."

All this emphasis on story isn't to suggest *Half-Life* wasn't also a technical achievement, however. In order to create Black Mesa, Valve – not yet the developer-publisher godbeast able to afford its own graphics engine and Ireland to boot – was forced to drag the ageing Quake engine out of the excrement-hued morass for which it had become famous. With id bringing out their own sequel to *Quake* – and brand-new, Carmack-devised technology with it – and Epic MegaGames introducing the world to the soon-to-be-ubiquitous Unreal engine, competition was fierce, and perhaps a little daunting for the Bellevue-based newcomer. But GoldSrc, the engine created from Quake's ashes – and the modern-day Source engine's ancestor – proved more than up to the task.

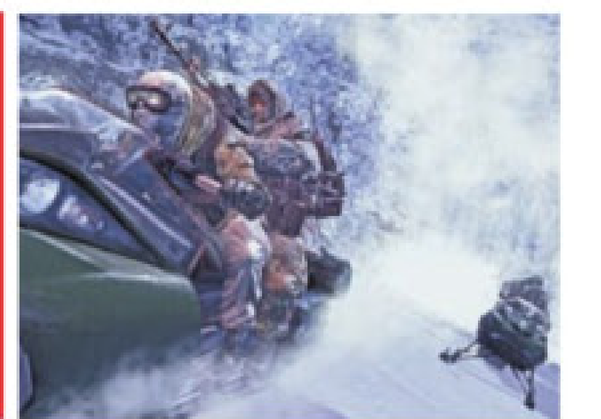
"The biggest advantage in starting with the Quake engine," Laidlaw says, "was that we were allowed to get right into making the game, rather than spending several years building the engine technology first. A lot of our level designers were experienced Quake modders and mappers too, and understood the engine's shortcomings and strengths. CONTINUED >.



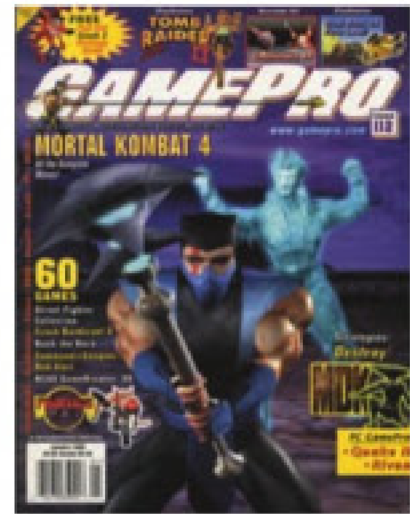
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION


Despite *Half-Life's* sleek aesthetic being worlds away from dreary browns, *Quake* is the primary reason for *Half-Life's* existence.


Everything Valve put into *Half-Life* is evident in the bestselling game of 2009, from the transparent player character to the scripted sequences.

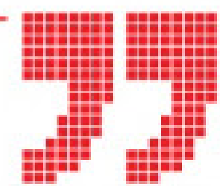


WHAT THEY SAID…



Half-Life is a masterpiece of epic proportions, the *Saving Private Ryan* of first-person shooters. You know you're in for something special right when the opening tram immerses you in a convincing world.

GamePro, 1998





Exploring *Half-Life*'s alien worlds divided the game's audience. No wonder Gordon didn't return there in the 2004 sequel.

Of course, there were some issues. The fact that the engine was changed so many times from the original meant that the designers were constantly catching up. They'd be stuck in this situation where they were waiting for new features to come down the line rather than just building prototypes straight away. And it wasn't really until the engine was finished that they were able to get productive with it."

Famously, Valve had planned on integrating real-time physics into *Half-Life*'s many puzzles – themselves an innovation within the then fairly limited shooter genre – but were deterred both by the size of the task so late in development and the car crash that was DreamWorks Interactive's *Trespasser*. Still, what remained was above and beyond any other FPS available on shelves. In hindsight, yes, it probably wasn't as beautiful as *Unreal*, but what *Half-Life* lacked in graphical chops, it made up for in its (still) astonishing AI. The military enemies in the game were Valve's primary AI showcase – and at the right difficulty, they're still some of the cleverest grunts both in videogames and the world of flesh and capillaries. A lone commando was bad enough, but in groups they demonstrated an alarming amount of co-operative intelligence, seemingly changing their strategy on-the-fly as they attempted to outmanoeuvre the player. Valve has never revealed the secrets behind *Half-Life*'s AI, and, curiously enough, the Combine soldiers of *Half-Life 2* seemed more behaviourally staid in comparison. Demonic possession, perhaps?

A LOT OF OUR LEVEL DESIGNERS WERE EXPERIENCED QUAKE MODDERS

At any rate, while *Half-Life*'s extraterrestrial enemies were notably less intelligent they were deeply, sometimes disturbingly, original. Squirming Freudian allusions abounded, from the headcrab's vaginal underbelly to the more overt excesses of the Gonarch – in Gabe Newell's words, "a giant testicle on a 20-foot-tall armoured spider." According to the sumptuous Valve bio *Raising The Bar*, most of these designs came out of the rather twisted brain of Ted Backman, whose plan was to elicit psychosexual reactions in his (presumed) young male audience.

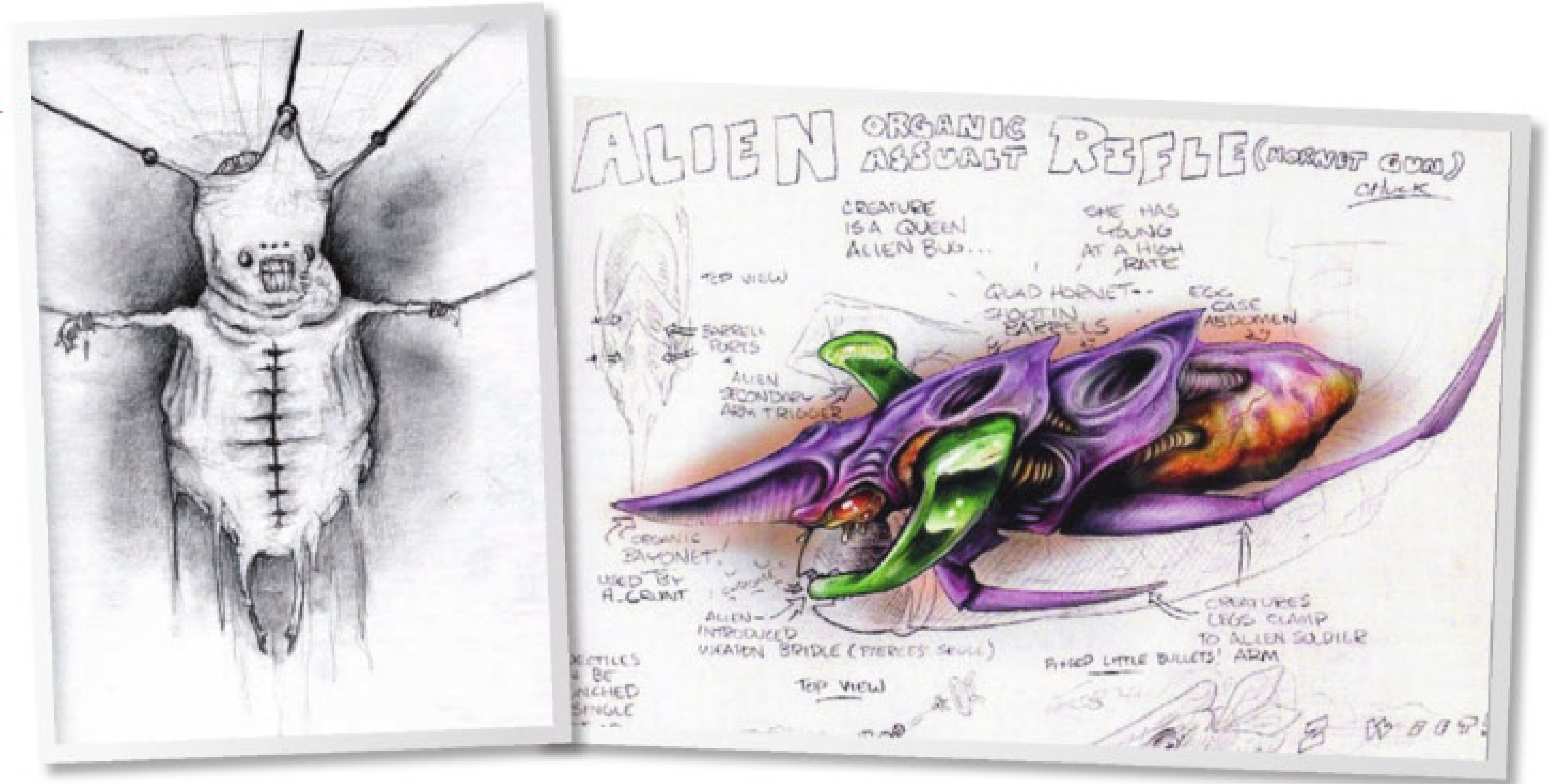
IT WAS THE juxtaposition of Black Mesa's sterile blues and the pallid flesh-white and claret of *Half-Life*'s monsters that made the game so aesthetically memorable, which may go some length to explain why many players found the penultimate chapter, set on the alien planet Xen, a bit boring in comparison. Still, they liked it enough to create countless mods extending the storyline while Laidlaw went to work on creating an even more oblique and surreal plot for *Half-Life 2*. And that was only the tip of the iceberg – quite apart from *Half-Life*'s breathtaking single-player component, Valve also managed to foster the most formidable user-content community the games industry has ever known, one which ended up spawning two of the most successful multiplayer games of all time: *Team Fortress Classic* (and *Team Fortress 2*) and *Counter-Strike*.

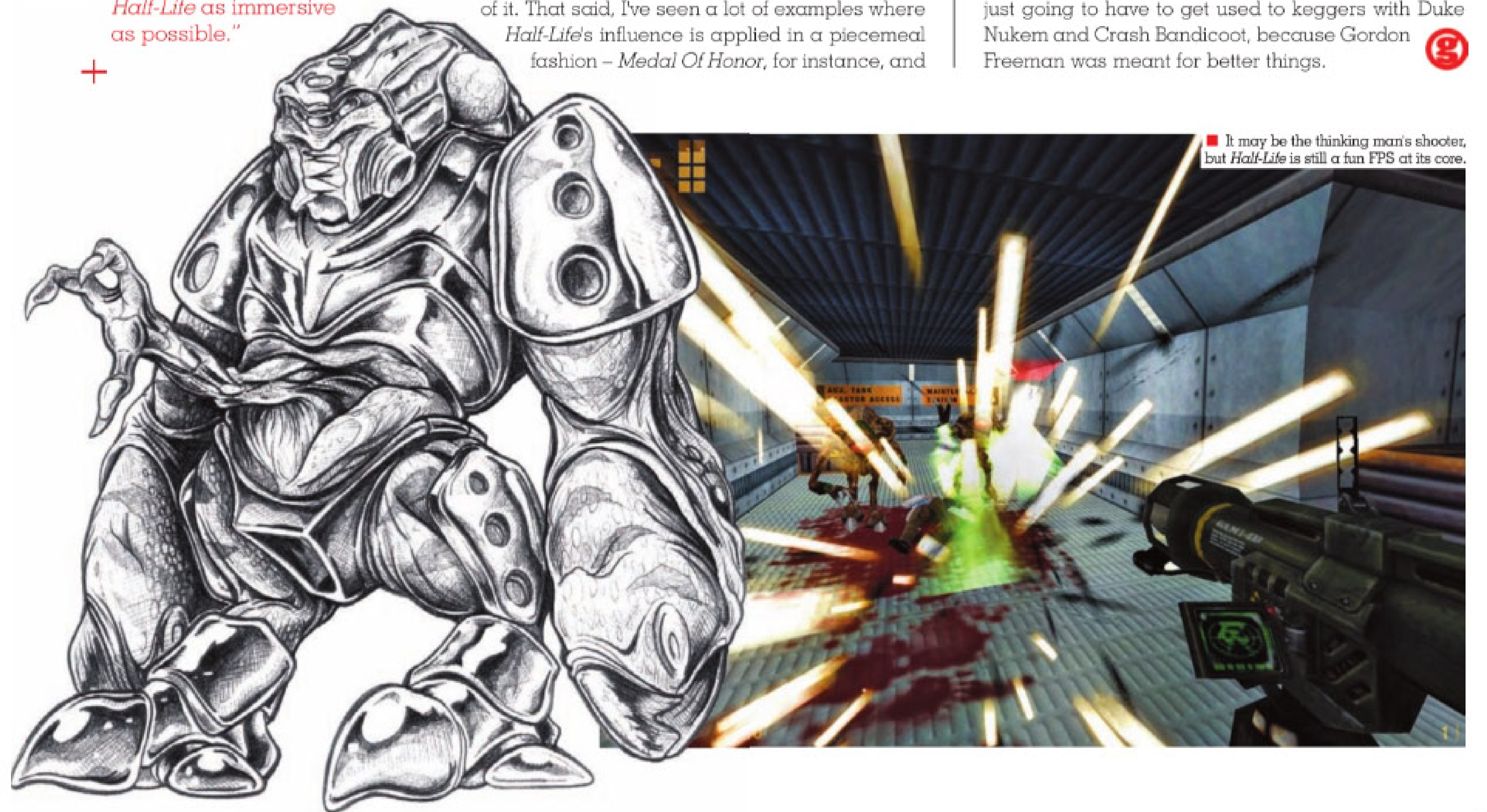
It isn't too difficult to see why *Half-Life* made such a deep impact on the gaming landscape, which is undoubtedly why Laidlaw remains surprised that so few developers have followed in Valve's footsteps. "I must say," he explains, "it was a lot fewer than I expected. I suppose it's a risky endeavour, and the narrative rules we implemented should only be done so if you know you're going to get something good out of it. That said, I've seen a lot of examples where *Half-Life*'s influence is applied in a piecemeal fashion – *Medal Of Honor*, for instance, and *Call Of Duty* both followed those principles, but it was inconsistent. There were moments of non-interactive exposition interspersed with the dynamic parts."

Perhaps, though, it's simply that *Half-Life* is much more pervasive than even Laidlaw realises. The game's core principles of dynamic exposition, first-person puzzle-solving and narrative depth have coloured everything from *Halo* to *Metroid Prime*, and it's now becoming increasingly difficult to remember where it all came from. And on a more wistful note, now that popular game design prefers emergence over scripted sequences, and open-endedness over tight, contained level design, it may well be that *Half-Life* marked the beginning of an era that is soon to close. Will it be consigned to the scrapheap of irrelevance, then? Unlikely: Ivan the Space Biker's just going to have to get used to keggers with Duke Nukem and Crash Bandicoot, because Gordon Freeman was meant for better things.

Immersion Tactics

Half-Life presented a minimalist mode of shooter design, starting an anti-HUD vogue that resulted in ideas such as *Dead Space*'s holographic information display, or the sound-based user interface in Peter Jackson's *King Kong: The Official Game Of The Movie*. (Whoever came up with that title should be put in front of a firing squad, by the way.) "We were inspired by id's efforts with *Doom* and *Quake*," Laidlaw shrugs. "It was about having a completely unobtrusive interface, and that fed into making Gordon Freeman completely transparent as a character. You were meant to feel like you were him. Our ultimate goal, throughout the entire development process, was to make *Half-Life* as immersive as possible."





It may be the thinking man's shooter, but *Half-Life* is still a fun FPS at its core.

Hall Of Fame… Mr. Game & Watch

Before mad apes, Italian plumbers, female bounty hunters and elfin warriors, there was Nintendo's battery-powered hero

MARIO. YOSHI. LINK. SAMUS. KIRBY. DONKEY KONG. All stand as proof that Nintendo is the master when it comes to creating videogame characters. The last three decades have seen Nintendo produce some of the most successful, enduring and recognised heroes to ever grace the gaming world. But while Nintendo is famous for its impeccable hit ratio when creating characters, its earliest hero, Mr. Game & Watch, failed to capture the same level of celebrity, despite being the first character to mascot his own series of consoles, rub shoulders with the likes of Mickey Mouse, Snoopy and Popeye, and play a pivotal role in the advent of portable gaming.

In 1980, while trying to enter the North American coin-op market with the games *Sheriff* and *Radar Scope* (the latter standing as Shigeru Miyamoto's earliest project), Nintendo released a series of handheld LCD games designed by Gunpei Yokoi. Game & Watch was Nintendo's first foray into mobile gaming, and owing to their long battery life and design, offered true portability for the first time in the games industry.

Mr. Game & Watch was a recurring character who appeared in a vast number of the sixty Game & Watch titles released by Nintendo between 1980 and 1991, playing either the central hero (as in the games *Ball*, *Chef*, *Judge*) or as a peripheral character the player would need to save or protect (*Manhole*, *Fire*). And while it was *Donkey Kong* that would catapult Nintendo to bigger things – the 1981 smash was one of the first arcade games to replace nondescript spaceships and aliens with proper characters – it was through Mr. Game & Watch that Nintendo first trialled this innovative approach to videogame design.

As it did when coming up with the look of Mario, Nintendo designed Mr. Game & Watch around the limitations of the character's host hardware. The unsophisticated LCD technology that powered its Game & Watch games didn't allow for the full-colour, detailed sprites of the arcades, so Nintendo was faced with the tricky task of shaping liquid crystal blobs into something resembling an identifiable personality. The only realistic option was to create a stick man.

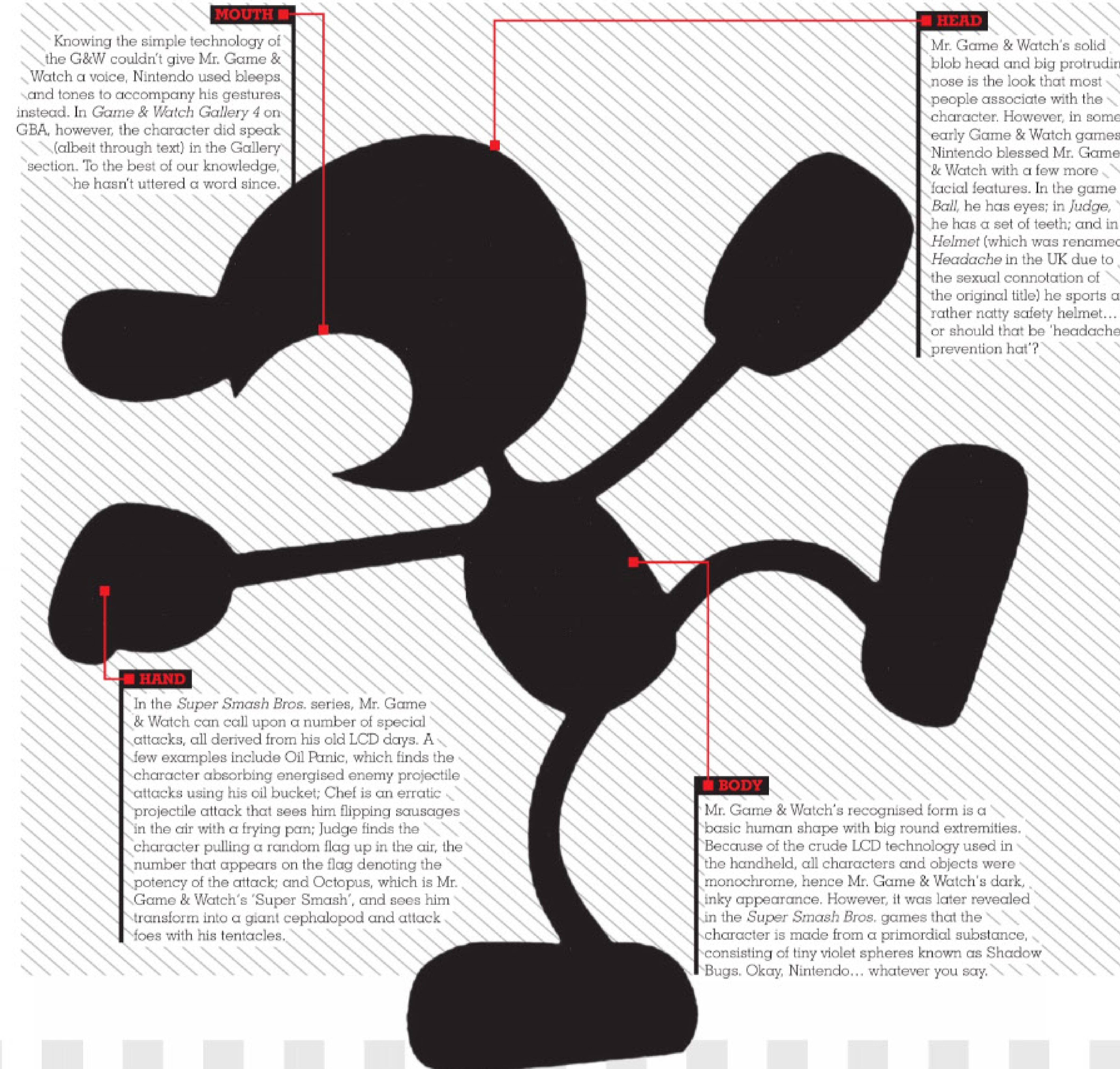
A basic humanoid shape, made up of a round black body, thin arms and legs ending in bulbous extremities, and a round face with a large gaping mouth and big round nose: Mr. Game & Watch's design was as simple and as functional as the Game & Watch units themselves. Nonetheless, his rudimentary look dovetailed perfectly with the simplistic nature of the games, while also making him easily distinguishable against the handheld's diminutive displays. Furthermore, Mr. Game & Watch's generic characteristics made him the ultimate everyman character, a faceless, versatile hero that could adapt to any game scenario.

INTERESTINGLY, THIS VERSATILE approach to character design nearly became a much more important part of Nintendo's creative process, according to a recent Iwata Asks interview with Shigeru Miyamoto. Mario, he revealed, was originally called 'Mr. Video' because he was supposed to appear in every single Nintendo game in different roles, just like our LCD chum.

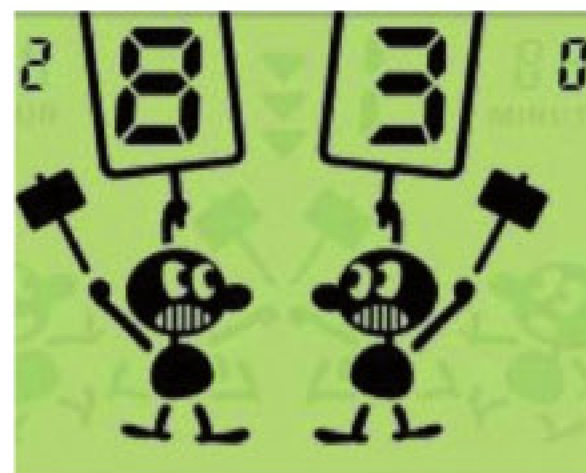
Mr. Video never came to be, however, and Nintendo soon created a whole host of popular characters in the form of Mario, Link and Kirby. These colourful, vibrant characters quickly made Mr. Game & Watch look dreary by comparison, and these new characters did him no favours by appearing in Game & Watch titles of their own, muscling in on his modest gaming patch. By the time the Game & Watch hardware was phased out, its mascot was all but forgotten, a fate that Nintendo has been smart to avoid since. "If Mario had been called 'Mr. Video', he might have disappeared off the face of the Earth," said Miyamoto in the Iwata Asks interview. He doesn't mention Mr. Game & Watch, of course, but we can tell he's speaking from experience.

In 2001, following some low-key reappearances in the *Game & Watch Gallery* titles, Mr. Game & Watch was given another chance after Nintendo dusted him off to appear in the *Super Smash Bros.* series. Nintendo embellished the crude makeup of the character, and, in a nod to his past games, based his special moves on old Game & Watch titles. Furthermore, the trophies in the game revealed some backstory on the character, explaining that he's made of a strange primordial substance and hails from a place called Superflat World.

This new lease of life reinforced Mr. Game & Watch's cult appeal, but also highlighted just how blank a slate the original design was – while underscoring how far Nintendo has come. Beside the developer's evergreen heroes, it's clear that Mr. Game & Watch was hardly a character at all, but more an icon of the LCD age. An embodiment of the Game & Watch brand, he's as close at it comes to being a playable logo.

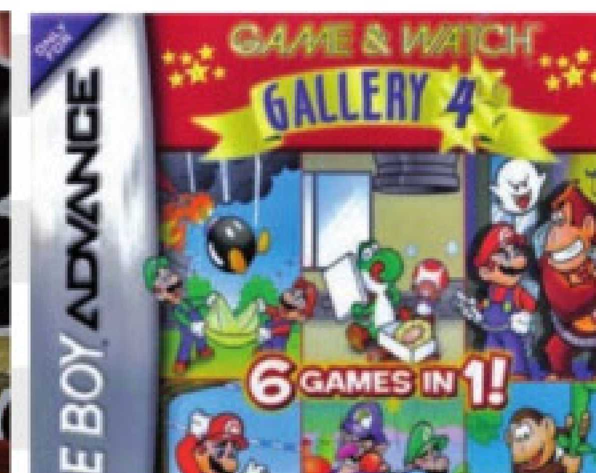


>. MAGIC MOMENTS


The close-up view of *Judge* afforded a more detailed look at Mr. Game & Watch. Look, teeth!


Fire sees the character getting his oily hide saved by a pair of firemen.


The character was revived by Nintendo when he appeared in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*.



Mr. Game & Watch featured on the Game Boy thanks to the *Game & Watch Gallery* series.


Mr. Game & Watch's Final Smash move in *SSB* sees him change into a giant octopus.


Mr. Game & Watch battles to reach his outside loo while avoiding a shower of tools in *Helmet*.


Our hero catches falling parachutists as they jump into shark-infested waters.


Ball starred Mr. Game & Watch, but he was replaced in the 1991 remake, *Mario The Juggler*.

GAME & WATCH'S UNSUNG HEROES

Though he was designed to adapt to any role, Mr. Game & Watch didn't actually appear in all sixty of Nintendo's handhelds. Some games featured bespoke characters, made to fit the loosely sketched fiction of later games. And as the designers acquired various cartoon licenses, or worked with IP derived from their own NES and arcade hits, Mr. Game & Watch gradually had to make room for more famous faces. Here are just a few of them...

1. CHEF

Variants: Widescreen
Year released: 1981
Play it on: G&W Gallery 2 and 4, Cooking Guide: Can't Decide What To Eat? (as an unlockable), DSiWare

WE'RE NOT ENTIRELY sure that this isn't just Mr. Game & Watch in a chef's outfit, considering the characters do look quite similar and Chef is one of the Mr. G&W's specials in *SSB* (though so is Octopus) but, regardless, this quirky game deserves recognition. The player assumes the role of a harassed chef who must cook various items of food by flipping them into the air using a frying pan. If that doesn't sound like the worst kitchen nightmare, you also had to watch out for an annoying cat who would stab at the food with a fork, hold it up and then randomly release it to mess up your timing.

2. FIRE

Variant: Silver/Widescreen
Year released: 1980
Play it on: G&W Gallery 1, 3 and 4

THIS LIGHTHEARTED TAKE on a bleak premise found players assuming the role of two firemen as they save people jumping from a burning building - players had to juggle multiple people in the air using a trampoline and get them to the safety of the ambulance parked at the other side of the screen. This G&W game actually features an appearance by Mr. Game & Watch, who goes all Agent Smith by cloning himself and playing the role of the hapless victims. It's also one of the most popular G&W games, and was spoofed brilliantly in *Earthworm Jim 2*, where it formed the inspiration for a minigame that saw Jim protecting falling Peter Puppies using a large marshmallow.

3. OCTOPUS

Variant: Widescreen
Year released: 1981
Play it on: G&W Gallery 1, 4 and G&W Collection 2

THE UNCOMPLICATED BRILLIANCE of the Game & Watch games can be summed up perfectly with *Octopus*, which features a simple two-button control scheme (one button to steer your man left, another right) and easy-to-grasp gameplay. Playing the role of a deep sea diver (who looks a little like an LCD version of a Big Daddy) you must dive into the murky drink and make your way to a treasure chest guarded by a giant octopus, being careful to avoid his wandering tentacles. Once the booty is collected, you then have to make your way back to the boat. *Octopus* is the inspiration behind Mr. Game & Watch's Final Smash move in the *SSB* games.

4. VERMIN

Variant: Silver
Year released: 1980
Play it on: Game Boy Gallery, G&W Collection 2 and DSiWare

IN *VERMIN* YOU play someone with an unhealthy passion for mole-murder. Standing over the entrances to five mole homes, you position your man over them, so whenever a poor mole pokes his head up to find out what the weather's doing, he's in prime position to have his poor life ended by a violent hammer blow to the head. In fact, the guy you play actually takes so much pride in his work that he dual-wields, holding a hammer in each hand to ensure maximum mole mutilation. Joking aside, the game is basically just Nintendo's own pocket-sized LCD take on the popular 1971 coin-op attraction *Whac-A-Mole*.

5. BOXING

Variant: Micro Vs System
Year released: 1984
Play it on: G&W Gallery 4

It doesn't take Barry McGuigan to realise that beat-'em-ups have come a long way since this primitive LCD game, which gives a crude performance of two men fighting each other while wearing very thick mittens. In the context of G&W games though, this portable beat-'em-up actually isn't all that bad. Viewed from a side-on perspective, you assume the role of a broken marionette, and with five bars of health must knock down your opponent using either body blows or jabs to the head. The name was later changed to *Punch-Out!!* in America to tie in with Nintendo's popular NES boxing game.

6. POPEYE

Variant: Widescreen/Panorama/Tabletop
Year released: 1983

Originally, Miyamoto wanted Popeye characters to appear in *Donkey Kong*, but couldn't get the license from King Features. However, because of the global success of its oddly named arcade game, Nintendo had no struggle obtaining it afterwards, hence the existence of the *Popeye* coin-op (1981), NES conversion (1983) and this Game & Watch title. While the arcade game played similarly to *Donkey Kong*, this version is quite a bit different. It finds the player controlling Popeye, as he sits in a rowboat trying to catch litter being tossed to him by Olive Oil while avoiding getting punched or smacked with a mallet by Bluto - weird but oddly captivating.

7. MICKEY MOUSE

Variant: Wide screen
Year Released: 1981

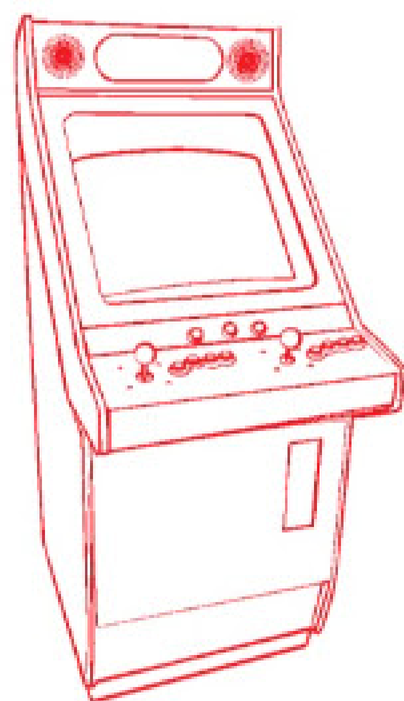
Mickey Mouse appeared in two Game & Watch games. The first, titled *Mickey Mouse*, saw the squeaky-voiced one collecting eggs from four separate hens (we thought mice ate cheese), with the player losing a life if one is missed. The game is very similar to another Game & Watch game called *Egg*. In fact, it's essentially the same game, but replaces Mickey with a fox - it's believed this was because Nintendo didn't hold the rights to Mickey Mouse in some parts of the world. Mickey also appeared alongside his pals Donald Duck and Goofy in 1982's *Mickey And Donald*, in which the trio worked together to put out a fire using a faulty hose.

8. SNOOPY

Variant: Table Top/Panorama
Year Released: 1982

As well as Mickey Mouse and Popeye, Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* characters were also licensed by Nintendo in the early Eighties to appear in their own series of Game & Watch titles. Not to be confused with the Game Boy Color game of the same name, as this portable iteration is far more simplistic, *Snoopy Tennis* found players helping Schulz's hugely popular two-toned beagle return a continuous barrage of tennis balls served to him by his owner Charlie Brown and pal Lucy.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8.



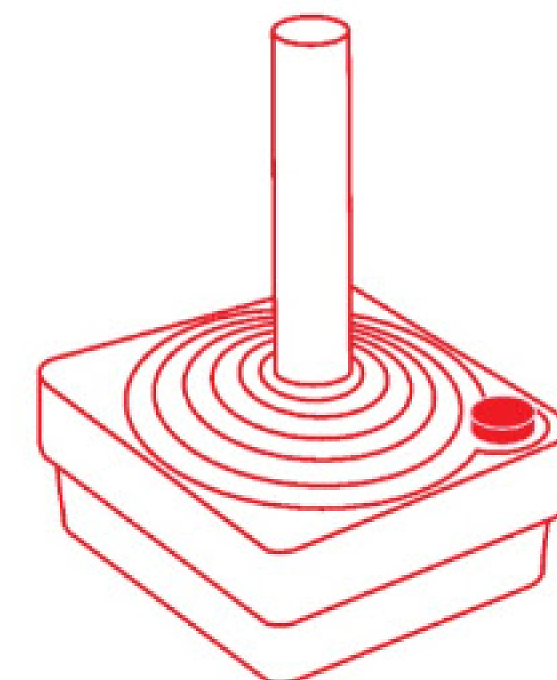
PORTING HEROES

After months of mocking history's worst arcade conversions, **games**™ thought it was high time to talk to the people responsible for some of the best and worst examples of this lost art, and find out exactly how difficult such a process could be

IF YOU THOUGHT that converting a PC or Xbox 360 game to PlayStation 3 was a thankless task, then spare a thought for the programmers and artists of the 1980s. Converting the hottest arcade hits to primitive home computers like the Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 was a near-impossible feat that often resulted in pale, watered-down adaptations of the real thing. Some were occasionally excellent, of course, but others were complete disasters, open to much ridicule.

Simon Butler created the graphics for several arcade conversions, including Taito's *Legend Of Kage*, SNK's *Athena* and Data East's *BreakThru*. And he doesn't beat about the bush when it comes to describing just how thankless a task such projects were. "We would simply resign ourselves to getting slated by the magazines or hope that they would appreciate the difficulty of our task and review us accordingly, but most of the jaded little divas were so far up their own arses they had no comprehension of what game development entailed."

While **games**™ wouldn't go so far as to call ourselves jaded little divas, we have been known to mock the odd Conversion Catastrophe on CONTINUED >.




Athena, the Greek goddess of self-defence and wisdom, lost a great deal of her physical presence in the transfer to home computers.


Conversion maestro Simon Butler, back in the 8-bit days.


Gary Bracey, enjoying his stint at Ocean Software.

a monthly basis, and that's because we judge games based on how much fun they are to play. However, Butler is right; why not take the time to see what it was like on the development side? With that in mind, we rounded up some of the biggest names in arcade conversions and asked them to explain anything and everything about the difficult but exciting world of 8-bit coin-op ports.

One of the most overlooked parts of the entire conversion process is also one of the most important, and it's where the whole process begins: licensing. As head of Ocean Software between 1986 and 1993, Gary Bracey spent many years negotiating the rights to some of the finest licenses of their time, both movie-based and coin-op, and feels that the two worlds were very similar when it came to home computer adaptation. "Ocean had great relationships with many coin-op companies, who earned considerable revenues from our conversions, and so, much like being presented with the scripts from movie companies, we were often privy to pre-production games when we could cherry-pick the new and upcoming titles. This was obviously more speculative than licensing something already released (and successful), but it gave us a jump on the competition. The process involved many trips to Japan, which I always enjoyed."

Being based in Manchester, Ocean Software was far away from Britain's biggest arcades, and even further from the generally Japanese developers that made the games, so it was essential that the company build up strong relationships with overseas publishers. "There were a number of key coin-op companies that Jon Woods [Ocean founder] had established a very close relationship with – Konami, Taito, Data East and SNK in particular," says Bracey.

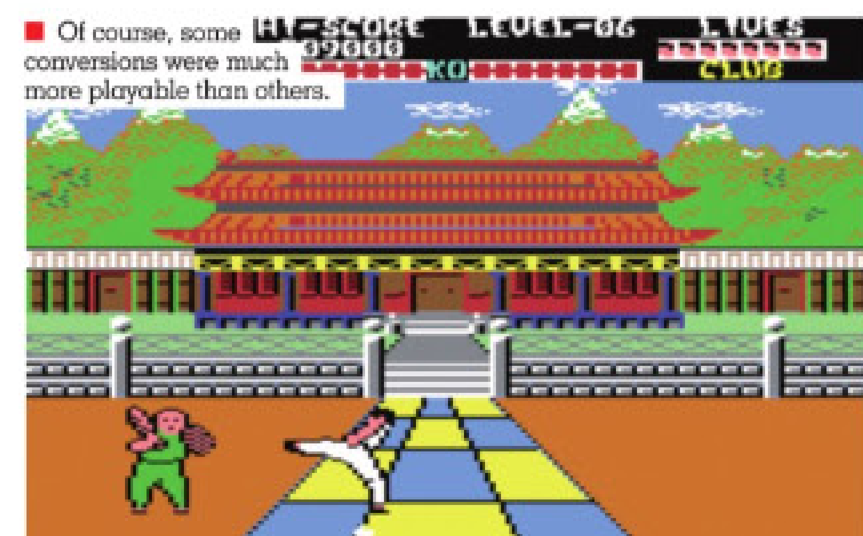
"The easiest [Japanese companies to deal with] were the ones that gave their Western subsidiaries authority to do these sort of deals. Konami had a good London office and we got to know the folks in the Taito Seattle office quite well. Some of these companies even got themselves agents to represent their titles, which is when the market started opening up a little wider. We always had an extra-special relationship with Data East, mainly because they were incredibly successful in the USA, and so that department was as autonomous as a Western-based subsidiary of a Japanese corporation could be. In fact, the ex-CEO of Data East USA (Ray Musci) later became President of Ocean USA."

WITH SO MANY arcade games around in the Eighties, Ocean had to think carefully about which licenses to acquire and which to leave well alone. Unsurprisingly, this mostly came down to the quality of the original games. "Every time we were in London, we would always check out the arcades to see what machines were getting the most play," Bracey recalls. "We also knew a few of the large distributors, and so they could give us info that wasn't generally available.



WE'D GET THE ARCADE CABINET, BUT WE WOULDN'T HAVE THE SOURCE CODE


GARY BRACEY
Head of Ocean Software 1986-1993



Of course, some conversions were much more playable than others.

Sometimes, of course, it was a question of 'gut' and, much like assessing films, you got a feel for what would be popular." Ocean's other concern, of course, was exactly how well these games would translate to the predominantly 8-bit computers of the time. "Approvals were often very tough, as we needed to convince [the original developers] that multicoloured sprites against a multi-parallax scrolling background, for instance, were difficult to achieve on a 48k Spectrum. Some things just weren't possible, but I think generally our guys did a good job."

Those guys, as Bracey puts it, were often hired hands; other studios contracted and trusted to turn Ocean's licenses into the next big home conversion. "In theory, it was easier to do a coin-op as it was an adaptation, rather than a movie license which needed to be designed as well as developed", he explains for context. "That's not to say it was totally easy, as there were the major challenges of the proverbial 'quart into a pint pot' that required pretty smart technical skills. However, because the core game existed for reference then it was easier to hand over to an external company, as opposed to developing in-house. There were obviously notable exceptions, when a game was such a potentially massive hit that we generally kept those to ourselves and our own people. *Combat School*, *Operation Wolf*, *Chase H.Q.* and *Renegade* come to mind. I do remember that if the team were really into the game then 99 per cent of the time the conversion would be superb, and so the guys' reaction to a particular game was a big factor in selection of which individual developer would work on it."

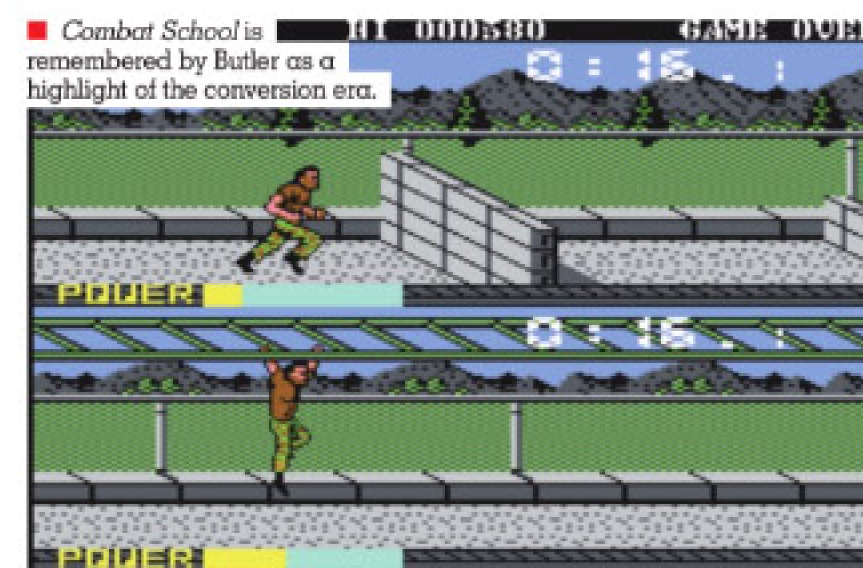
"DOING THAT WORK seemed the simplest way of getting a foothold in the industry," says David Leitch, programmer on Spectrum's *Double Dragon* and *Shinobi*, among other conversions. "I didn't have a well thought-out plan, but it seemed like a much easier option getting a job with a company doing work-for-hire projects than putting a team together and finding funding to develop original games. Plus the money was more reliable, although I wouldn't describe it as more lucrative, especially not when I first started out."

Butler elaborates, "In 27 years in the industry I think I have worked on less than five of my own titles, so I never saw arcade conversion as anything other than part and parcel of my day-to-day job as a pixel-pusher. Working for clients such as Ocean, it was always fairly obvious that you would seldom, if ever, get a chance to develop anything of your own. Conversions and licenses were far more lucrative in their eyes, and it was only the rare exception such as *Wizball*, where a non-conversion actually made them money. Whether the *Wizballs* of the world made as much money as *Robocop* or *Batman* is another question, and one I think we can all probably guess the answer to."

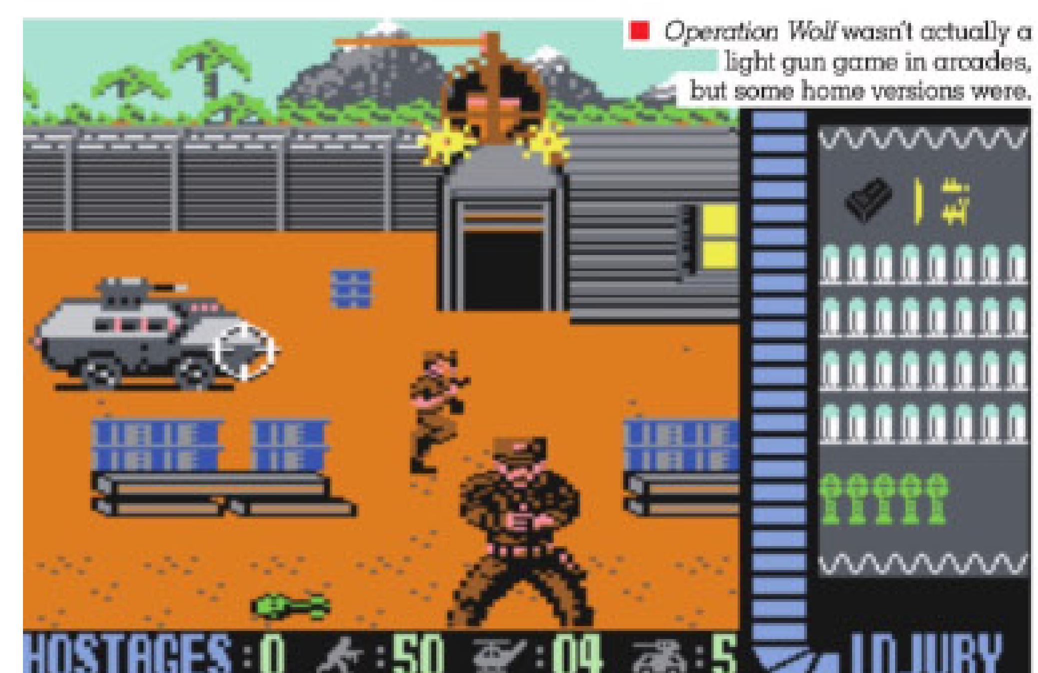
Conversion specialists like Butler and Leitch would generally work for small development companies that would contract conversion work from big publishers like Ocean, and would simply have to get on the job with the most limited of help from the original manufacturer or the publisher itself.

"We were on our own and had to stand or fall on our own merits," says Butler. "I suppose that was part of the challenge, but I can honestly say that the manufacturers would have been as much use in home game development as a one legged man in an arse-kicking contest. They would have just got in the way. We knew our jobs, and for the most part those jobs involved dissecting each game and then working out what was feasible and what wasn't. After that it was a case of 'do the best you could with the tools to hand'."

"For most of the things I worked on, we'd get the arcade cabinet delivered to the office, but we wouldn't have the source code or the original assets to work from, unless someone much smarter than myself could figure out how to rip them out of CONTINUED >.



Combat School is remembered by Butler as a highlight of the conversion era.



Operation Wolf wasn't actually a light gun game in arcades, but some home versions were.



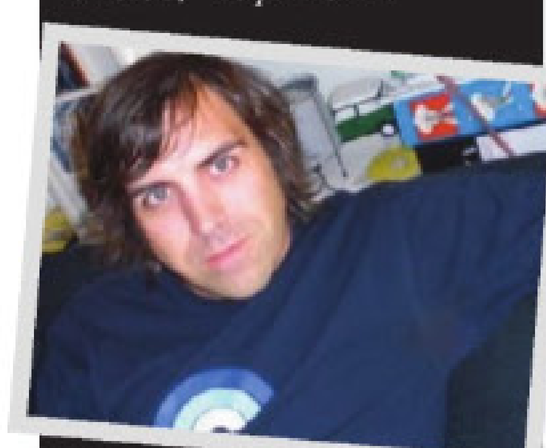
Background-absorbing Spectrum sprites meant even the best arcade conversion suffered in terms of visuals.



MUSIC TO OUR EARS

JOANTHAN DUNN, NOW of *Excitebike 64* developer Left Field Productions, started his videogame career as an in-house musician for Ocean and worked on a number of arcade conversions while there. "Mostly I did arrangements of the original score, taking into consideration the more limited audio capabilities of the target machine," he says. And just like the graphics side of converting, musicians constantly had to shoehorn content into a much less powerful machine. "It usually involved taking music designed for an 8-channel audio device down to the 3-channel machines of the time. A lot of the music I transcribed by ear, but occasionally I did get sent the score for the music. We always had a version of the arcade cabinet we were working on."

Interestingly, though artists and programmers preferred the Spectrum for developing home conversions, it seems that musicians' tastes lay elsewhere. "The superior SID chip made the Commodore 64 the only choice," says Dunn.



the arcade boards," adds Leitch. "So all the things from that era that I ported were actually look-and-feel based rewrites. It could be argued that if we'd had the coin-op source code, it wouldn't have been a lot of help because of the extent to which it would have needed to be re-engineered to work on the target system. So maybe that's why no one ever bothered chasing it up…"

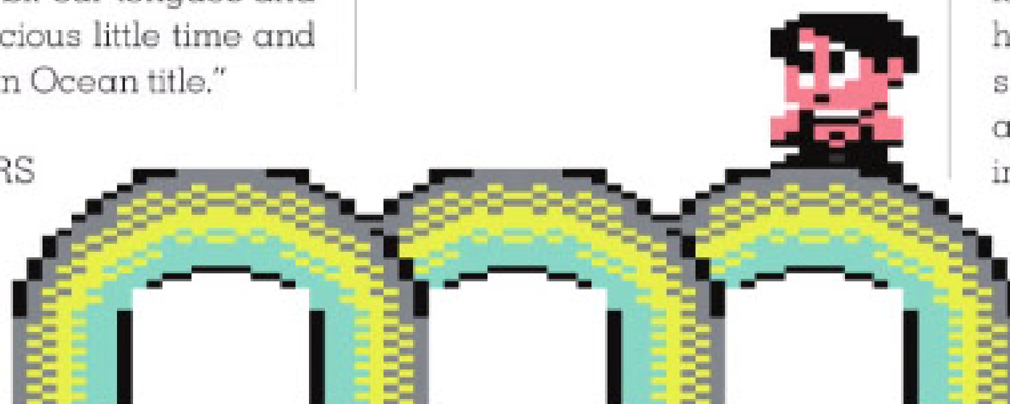
Lack of support was one thing, but it was the comparatively primitive power of the 8-bit home computers that really made arcade conversions such a challenge. "It was a pretty soulless task," says Butler, "and even though the machines at that point were far removed from those of the *Street Fighter II* era and later, they were well advanced over their 8-bit brethren. With the exception of *Legend Of Kage*, which was a travesty of a game to begin with, very few of our conversions came close to the original. Most of the time we just soldiered on gamely, trying our best to make the housebrick-sized pixels on the C64 or the wonderful palettes of the spectrum come as close to the arcade original as possible.

"Once I wound up working in-house for Ocean, we would just roll our eyes when they wheeled in the latest machine, and we stood slack-jawed at some shooter with a gazillion bullets filling the skies over some highly detailed futuristic city in a billion colours. We knew we had to somehow replicate that on the Amstrad or the Spectrum, so we bit our tongues and just got on with it. There was precious little time and the clock was always ticking on an Ocean title."





SIMON BUTLER
Programmer



JAPANESE DEVELOPERS PORTING to the comparatively powerful consoles of the Eighties may not have worried too much about the increasing complexity of coin-op games but, in the UK, the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC were less up to the task and all had their owns pros and cons. "I developed on every format at one point or another," says Butler. "My house had pretty much every machine laying around somewhere, because I worked from home as well as in-house. But my machine of choice, for some inexplicable reason, has always been the Spectrum.

Having played a lot of the conversions on that machine, I suppose I personally would have to say I like Speccy conversions, mainly because of the detail you could get with the outlined sprites. The 64 was the ponce's machine. They had ideas above their station and everything was always a bit 'widescreen' with those Lego-sized pixels. The Amstrad was cool because of the two resolutions, but always had that air of being the poor cousin sat in the corner."

David Leitch also found himself working on the humble Speccy the most. "All the display stuff had to be done in software, but it had a comparatively speedy processor. And because of the weird colour system, you didn't have to process a massive amount of data to draw stuff. The Commodore 64 had hardware scrolling, a character-mapped screen and a few hardware sprites that could be 'multiplexed', but those factors were offset by a rather slow processor. And the original Amstrad CPC machine was pretty horrible, but the later version was probably the best of the bunch." On a more general level, the problems across the board were "usually along the lines of trying to replicate stuff that had hardware support on the coin-op, like hardware scrolling and sprites, when you had to do everything in software on the target machine. Plus the target machines usually had much less memory. So, for a whole bunch of reasons, you had to write really tight, optimal code."

Ultimately, however, sensible programmers had to resign themselves to the fact that arcade perfection was often a technical impossibility, and CONTINUED >.



It's not unfair to suggest the subtlety of *Kage's* changing seasons was pretty much wasted on the Spectrum colour palette.



Legend Of Kage suffered in all its conversions, but then the coin-op isn't much fun either.

HI 0000000





Outside The Box

Steve Blower was a prominent package designer and illustrator in the Eighties, working for Bug Byte, Imagine Software and Ocean. And, as he explains, the art of designing the packaging for arcade conversions was somehow much more strict and open to publisher interference than any other part of the process

How did you get into the videogames business, and how did you come to be involved in videogame packaging design?

It was around the period 1981 when I was working from my own studio in Liverpool as an illustrator/graphic designer. I was sub-contracted by a local advertising agency to produce an illustration for a double page colour ad for Bug Byte, one of the UK's first videogames developers and publishers. Two of the staff at Bug Byte, Mark Butler and Dave Lawson, saw my work and visited me at my studio asking if I would be interested in producing illustrations for their first videogames. I then produced the illustrations for *Arcadia*, *Schizoids* and *Catcha Snatcha*, and also designed the Imagine logo. Mark and Dave then asked me if I would be interested in joining Imagine as a junior part in their fledgling videogames company, Imagine Software. I accepted their offer, designed the Imagine logo and joined them in their new offices in Temple Street, Liverpool. After the demise of Imagine I was approached by David Ward of Ocean Software to join Ocean as creative director - a position that I thoroughly enjoyed for a period of 14 years, winning numerous industry awards, including four Golden Joysticks, for packaging and advertising design.

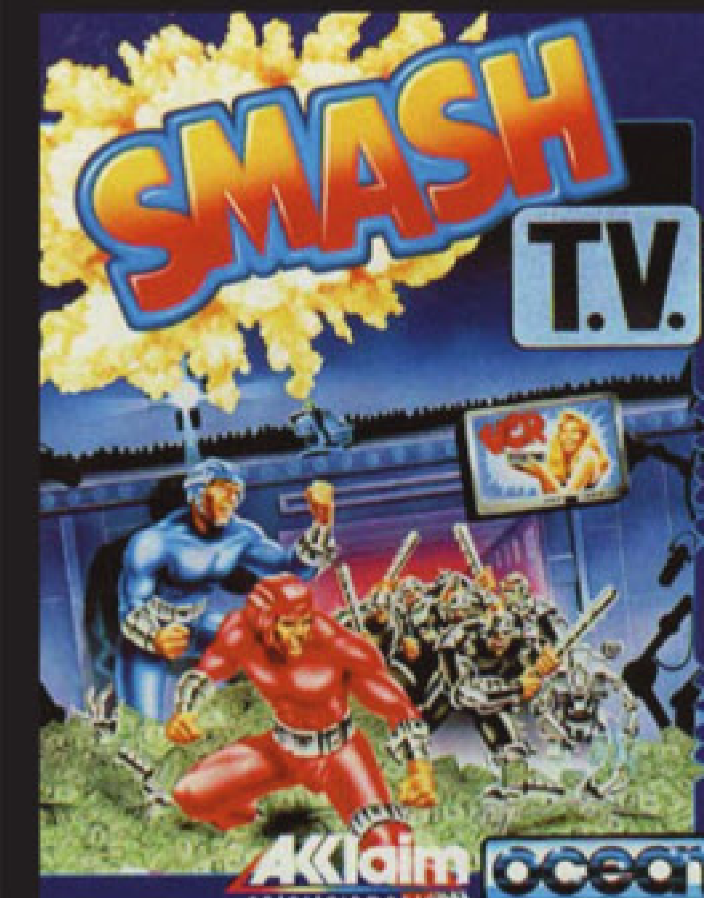


When working on arcade conversions, how much support were you given by the original arcade manufacturer?

Licensed Arcade conversions had to follow detailed specifications set by the licensing publisher who, more often than not, supplied colour transparencies of the illustration and logos. We were never left to our own devices entirely, apart from the design of the rear of the packaging, instruction manuals and advertising. As the industry progressed – and with the introduction of console-based games – then the licensing games manufacturers became much more specific about the design and layout of the packaging, by supplying very specific style guides.

And did those manufacturers place any limitations on you in terms of what you could and could not write or display on the packaging?

Absolutely. The placement of graphics elements such as barcodes, the licensor's logo, format icon, et cetera, had to follow a generic format. We were not allowed to crop the central image illustration.



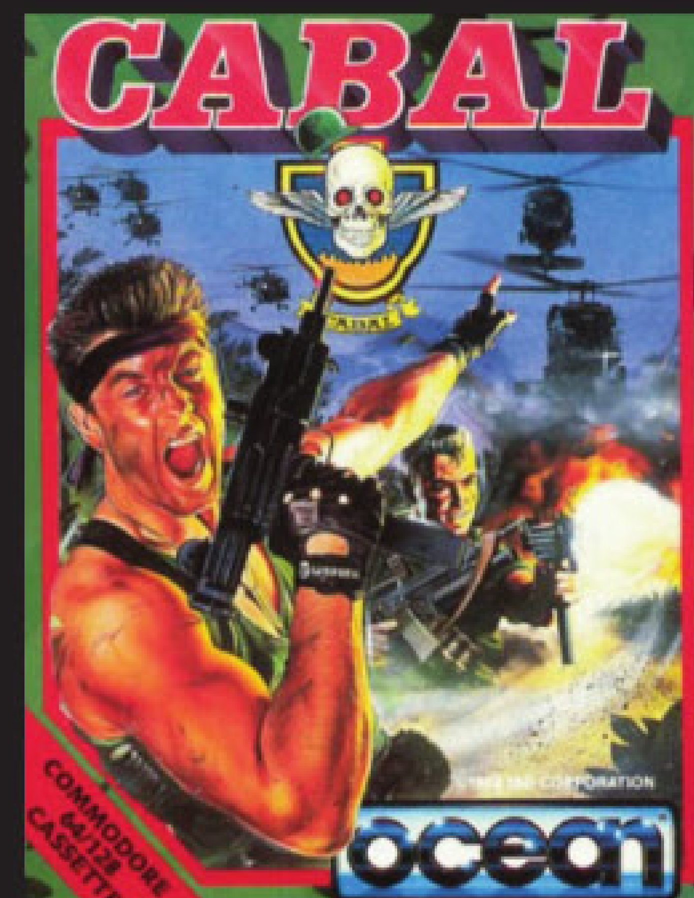
Do you recall any particular difficulties that came up?

I recall that one arcade manufacturer was particularly difficult to work with at the time. All artwork for packaging, which was produced without the aid of computers, had to be sent to Japan for approval, which always took longer than expected. We often found that, although we followed their style guide to the letter, the design would be 'failed' for some banal observation regarding a small design element that was more subjective than objective. We got around this by keeping our design input to a minimum, and almost dispensing with it altogether on the front of the packaging.

LICENSED ARCADE CONVERSIONS HAD TO FOLLOW DETAILED SPECIFICATIONS

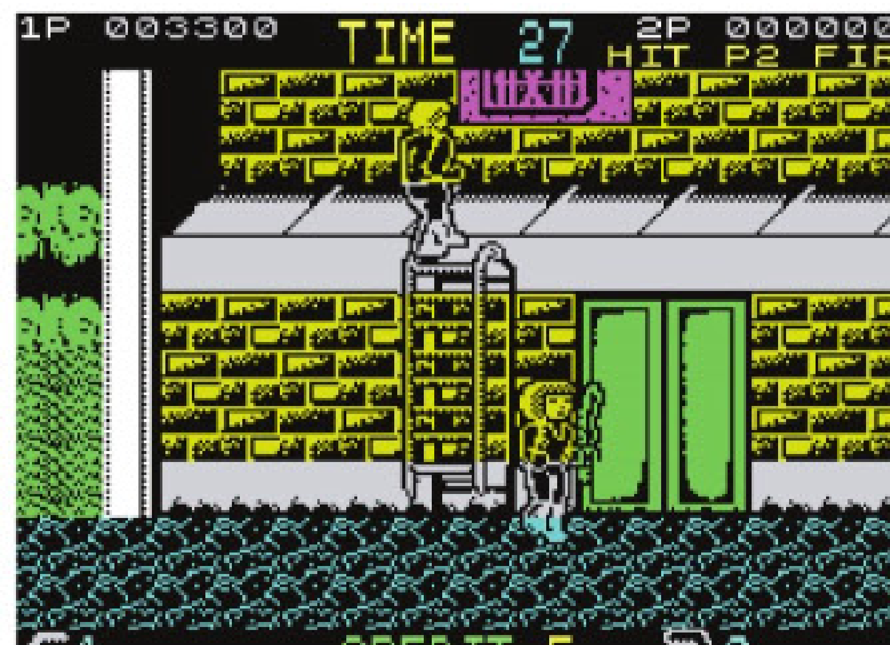
What was the best thing about working in this particular field?

The best experience I had was working with Ocean Software in the early days (1982 - 1992). The industry was young and incredibly dynamic. I was lucky to be in on it at this stage, as I had free rein to let my creativity work at its best for Ocean, and to see the effect of it. The whole industry was such a buzz.





■ Winners don't do drugs, especially if the world is already a flat shade of banana yellow. Very bad for the brain.



what really mattered was the ability to make the player enjoy the game in the same way as they had the coin-op, as Leitch explains. "Because there was usually a big disparity between the hardware capabilities of the coin-op and the target platform, you'd know from the outset that you'd have to drop some features or implement them in a simplified way. So that means you have to think really carefully about what makes the original version a good game – what are the things that people enjoy most when they're playing it? – and then you concentrate on getting them right. And I think that's actually really good training for making your own games."

All the best intentions couldn't produce consistently excellent conversions, of course, and the realities of game development mean that even the best coders and artists produced disappointing conversions from time to time. "I tried to get clever on C64 *Athena*," recalls Butler. "I used high-res sprites on flat coloured backdrops and it looked like it had been draw with crayons by a blind monkey, as one of the reviewers so succinctly put it.

■■■ "I TRY MY best not to think of my arcade conversions. They are a painful part of my past, only because of the level of frustration and the desire for the end product to be so much better than was possible at the time. But it was also a learning curve, and an era I can honestly say I would not have missed for the world. If pressed, I think I would have to say *Combat School* [went well] because round that time I was playing *Heartland*, and I saw *Combat School* as a chance to do high-res overlays, so that the sprites on the 64 would be in full colour but also have black outlines on them. Gary Bracey, bless his cotton socks (they're probably silk Armani now) gave me carte blanche to do the overlays and Alan Shortt, one of the coders on the 64 version, adapted his already spiffy sprite/tile editor to do the overlays. And without wanting to blow my own trumpet, I think they worked pretty well."

David Leitch tells of similar ups and downs. "*Double Dragon* didn't turn out too well, which was a shame, as it was a really big title and it was also my first professional job. But that was probably the main reason it wasn't any good. I don't think I had enough experience to get straight into doing a good job of it, and I spent too much time figuring out the basics and agonising over how I'd approach things. If you break it down, nearly all the main features of the original are in the Spectrum version, but they're all a bit crap and the net result is a rather ugly and plodding thing. The cardinal sin in the work-for-hire business is being late, and we managed to get it out on time, but that's probably the only good thing to be said about it.

"Out of the Spectrum stuff I did, *NARC* got the best reviews, and I think our version was pretty faithful to the original. And I was very pleased with that, because there's a ton of stuff going on in it – it's probably the most technically proficient piece of work I did on that platform. But personally, I don't think it's that great a game. Once you get beyond the brutal humour of blowing drug dealers to pieces and stealing their gear, it's a little bit monotonous. So I think my favourite is *Shinobi*. It looks like a bit of a dog's breakfast in some places (mainly because of the dreaded attribute system), but the gameplay is really good. There are lots of different enemy types and boss fights and even a 3D minigame thrown in. Our version is a little bit clunky, but I think it still captured the appeal of the original. Most of the credit for it being a great game goes to the development team at Sega, but it makes me happy to think we didn't muck it up."



DAVID LEITCH
Programmer



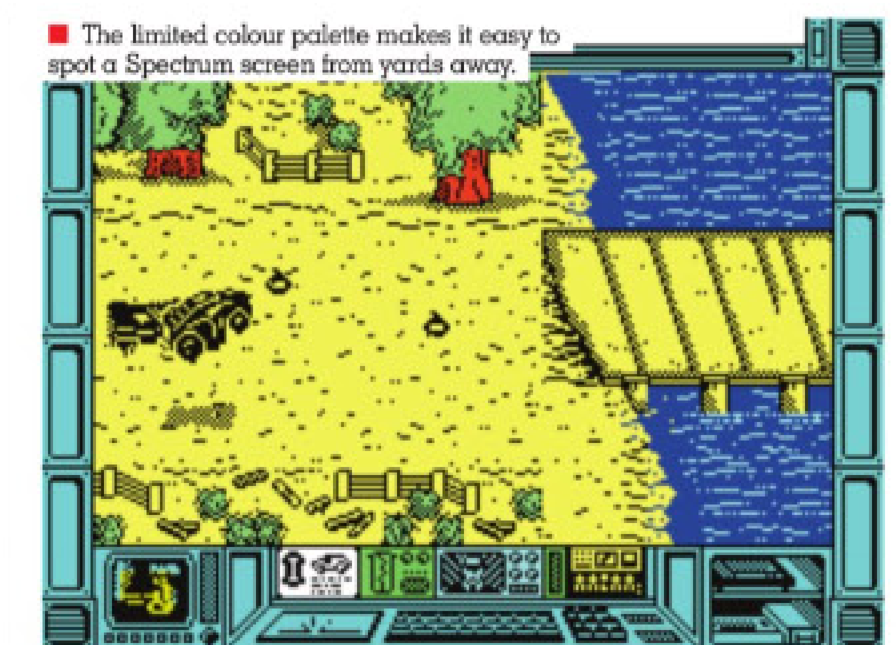
■■■ AS THE AGE of 8-bit computers passed into 16-bit systems and eventually into super-powered games consoles, arcade conversions increasingly became near-perfect and, in some cases (such as *Soul Calibur II*), were actually superior to the coin-op originals. And as the arcades themselves began to fade away, new generations of gamer no longer even thought in terms of good or bad conversions. With the original arcade games now widely available via emulation or official digital distribution channels, the age of home ports has become a distant memory, but they're memories that our interviewees are understandably fond of… at least for the most part.

"The downside of converting from an arcade machine far outweighed anything positive," says Butler. "I can honestly say that having to play the machines so extensively that we knew the levels, the graphics, the attack waves and the sprites off by heart was possibly the only good part of being involved with an arcade title. How many people our age got to play a wide variety of arcade machines for free and then got paid to do it? But the fact that they encouraged little if any creative process pretty much took the shine off things."

I TRY NOT TO THINK OF MY CONVERSIONS. THEY ARE A PAINFUL PART OF MY PAST

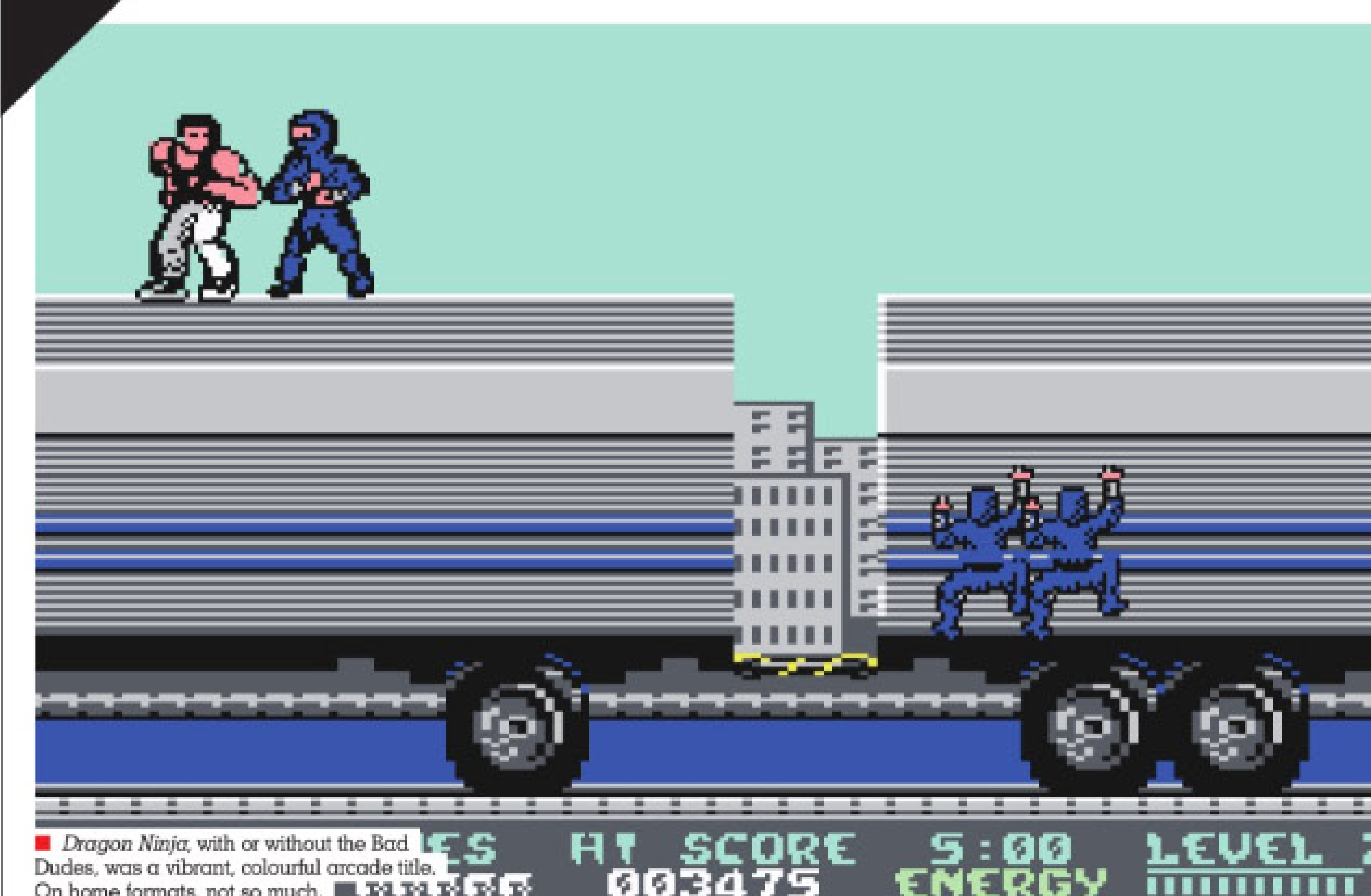
"The really cool thing about those days," counters Leitch, "was that even though the capabilities of the home systems didn't match the hardware being used in the arcades, with a bit of effort and imagination you could bridge the gap and produce convincing versions of the most popular and successful games of the time. You could do that virtually on your own. And that was really inspiring, because it made the whole industry seem really accessible. The first proper game I wrote on the Spectrum was a version of *Pengo*, cribbed from numerous visits to the local arcades. It turned out pretty well, and that was it – I knew I could make computer games. So it's nice to see platforms like the iPhone doing so well these days. No one's ever going to knock out something like *Super Mario Galaxy* in their back bedroom, but they might well be able to come up with the next *Flight Control* or *Doodlejump*."




■ The limited colour palette makes it easy to spot a Spectrum screen from yards away.



■ *New Zealand Story* saw some shocking ports, particularly the Amstrad version.



■ *Dragon Ninja*, with or without the Bad Dudes, was a vibrant, colourful arcade title. On home formats, not so much.

BEARING THE LOAD

Ste Pickford discusses his time designing loading screens for Eighties conversions

■ ONE OF THE most overlooked aspects of arcade conversions is the humble loading screen. Though not a part of the game itself, these screens were able to use more colours and a higher resolution than the in-game graphics, and helped give the player a nice taste of the original coin-op experience… if done properly. Ste Pickford, creator of *Wetrix* and *Naked War*, got his start as a freelance artist, and was the man behind the wonderful loading screen for *Ghosts 'N Goblins*.

"The software we had was very primitive, but it wasn't quite as bad as working on graph paper, like they did at Ultimate," he says of the creative process. "I've always been quite technically minded, rather than particularly flamboyant and artistic, so doing computer graphics - even with the relative freedom offered by a loading screen - probably suited my analytical nature.

"The most difficult – but also most enjoyable – part was the lettering," he says, somewhat surprisingly. "There were no fonts available, or decent text tools, and I almost never had cover art to copy from, so I was free to invent titles and logos on most loading screens."

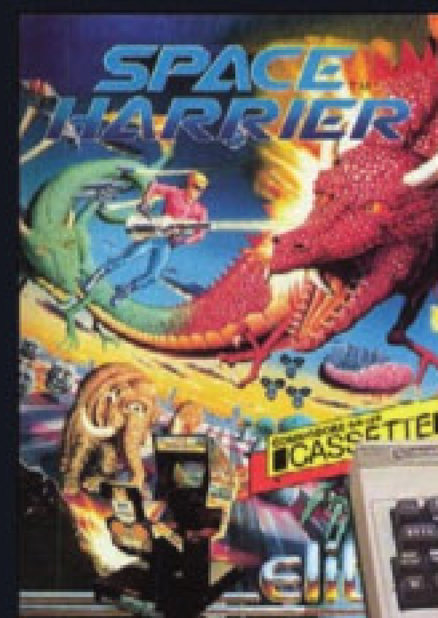
"For *Ghosts 'N Goblins* there was some promo art, which I think was the art for the side of the arcade cabinet, which I got a copy of, and which I copied for the loading screen. I don't think I did many other arcade game loading screens, but if I did it would probably just be a manual, hand-drawn copy of the game's logo done by looking at the machine's attract mode between games and copying it. I guess the industry was young then, and we were just left to get on with it."



■ Eighties gamers had to spend several minutes staring at a loading screen before they got to play the game. Good thing most of them looked ace.

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Commodore 64
Year: 1987
Publisher: Elite
Developer: In-House

SPACE HARRIER

THE HYPE



LIKE MANY SEGA games of the period, *Space Harrier* debuted in the arcade and immediately attracted swarms of gamers, eager to see another slice of cutting-edge coin-op action. The 1985 release came in three different cabinets, the best of which sat the player in a hydraulic seat that rocked them from side to side in accordance with the on-screen action. It was a gimmick that got people to drop a credit in the coin slot, but it was the game itself that kept them coming back. Transferring the gameplay of the 2D shoot-'em-up into a simulated 3D space, it looked incredible and played pretty well too, the sense of speed and huge multi-sprite bosses, in particular, making it one of the most-played arcade games of the era.

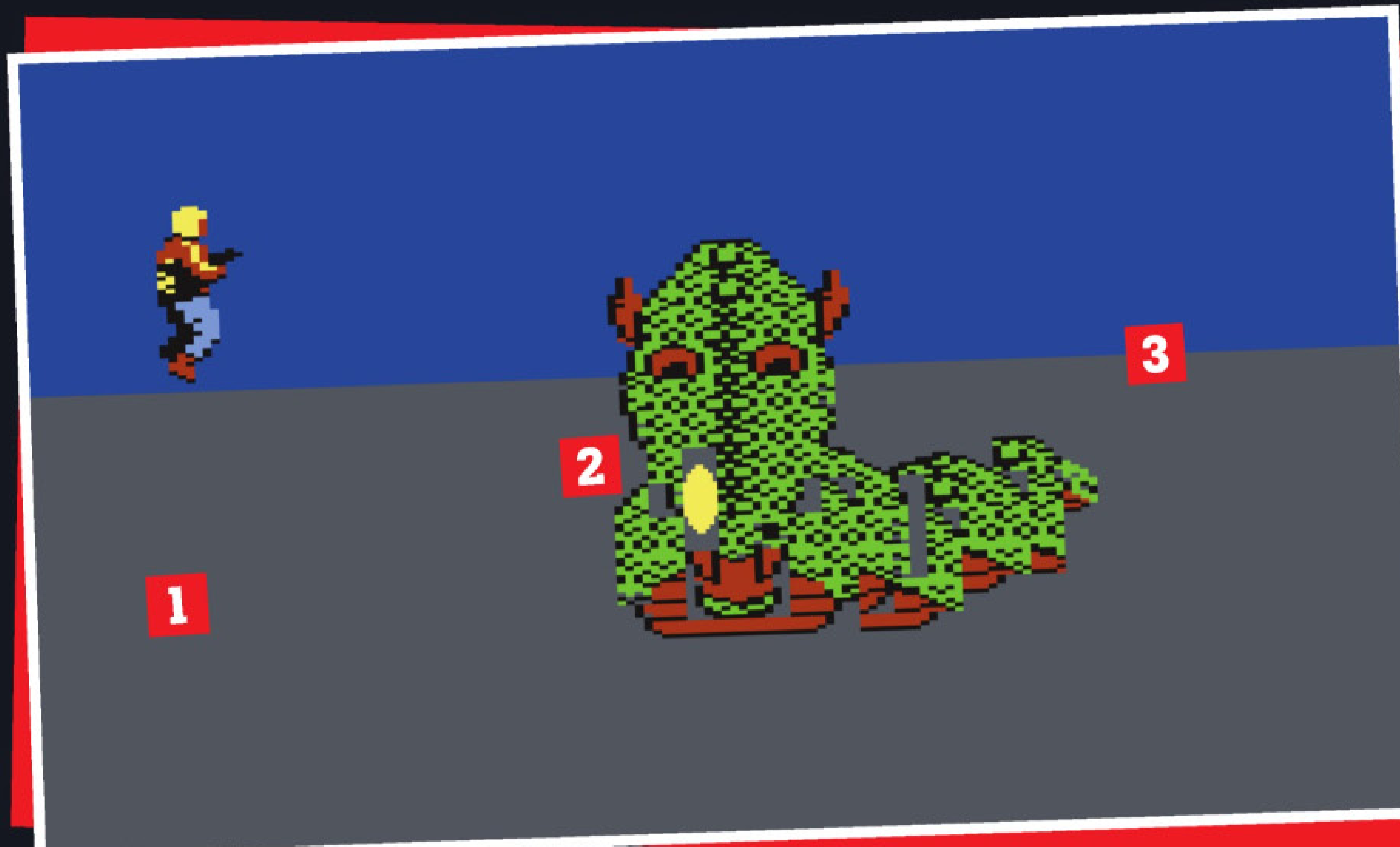
THE WARNING SIGNS

Those screens don't quite look arcade-perfect but they look unrealistically better than anything else on C64. That's quite suspicious.

This text seems to say that Japan is a trademark of Sega. They can't even get their legal facts right!



This is the space where you'd normally have lots of glowing review quotes, but it seems worryingly empty to us.



THE REALITY

ANY HOME CONVERSION of *Space Harrier* will instantly fail to match the coin-op game simply because it doesn't have the hydraulic cabinet, which was half the fun, if we're honest. To make up for that, the port needs to come as close to replicating the three-dimensional thrills of the actual game as is possible, but the Commodore 64 version actually does the opposite by stripping out any sort of effect that could impress the player. The illusion is so weak, in fact, that the dragon appears to be crawling along the floor like a slug. The speed is there, but with so few frames of animation, the game is virtually unplayable. Inexcusably, the memorable theme tune is unrecognisable in its SID chip form and the iconic "Welcome to the fantasy zone" speech is nowhere to be heard.

1 The original arcade game used a patterned floor to simulate a feeling of moving in 3D space, but the C64 version is so flat and lifeless it barely tries to look the part. The resulting game is much less exciting than the coin-op was.

2 *Space Harrier's* iconic first-level boss is done a real disservice in the C64 conversion. Elite got the use of multiple sprites right, but wherever they overlap, graphical glitches make the dragon transparent, revealing the grey background behind.

3 A common criticism of C64 *Space Harrier* is that it's too fast. But that's not strictly true. The real problem is that the low number of frames makes obstacles and enemies seemingly appear out of nowhere and jump to the front of the screen, causing unfair deaths.

What You Should Have Played It On

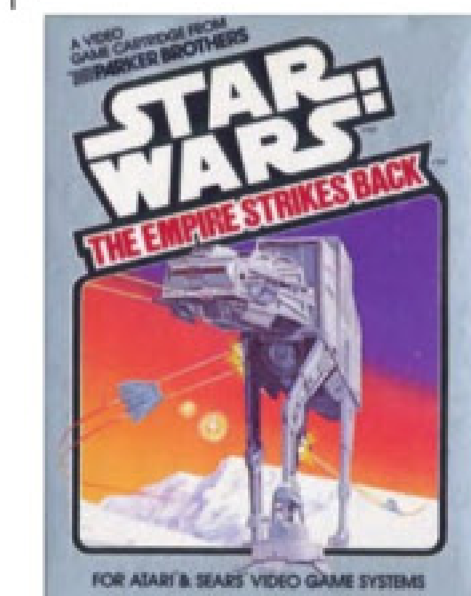


Overall, we have to say that the 32X version of *Space Harrier* was the best. But it wasn't out in the Eighties and no one owned that terrible console anyway, so it doesn't count. Instead, we'll go for the well-presented and super-slick PC-Engine version.

BEHIND THE SCENES

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

It was the first ever videogame to come from Parker Brothers, and was the very first game to plunge you into the *Star Wars* universe too. games™ looks back on, and talks to the makers of, a pioneering shoot-'em-up



Released: 1982
Format: Atari 2600, Intellivision
Publisher: Parker Bros
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Rex Bradford
Programmer, Musician
Sam Kjellman
Designer, Artist

ONE OF THE earliest lessons learned in videogame publishing, and one that still rings true today, is that the license is king. Atari learned the lesson first, securing hit arcade conversions for its 2600 games console to lure in a huge, game-hungry crowd, but it was the advent of movie licenses – like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* – that represented the biggest opportunity to attract a wide audience. And as movie licenses went in the early Eighties, there were few that came bigger and more popular than *Star Wars*.

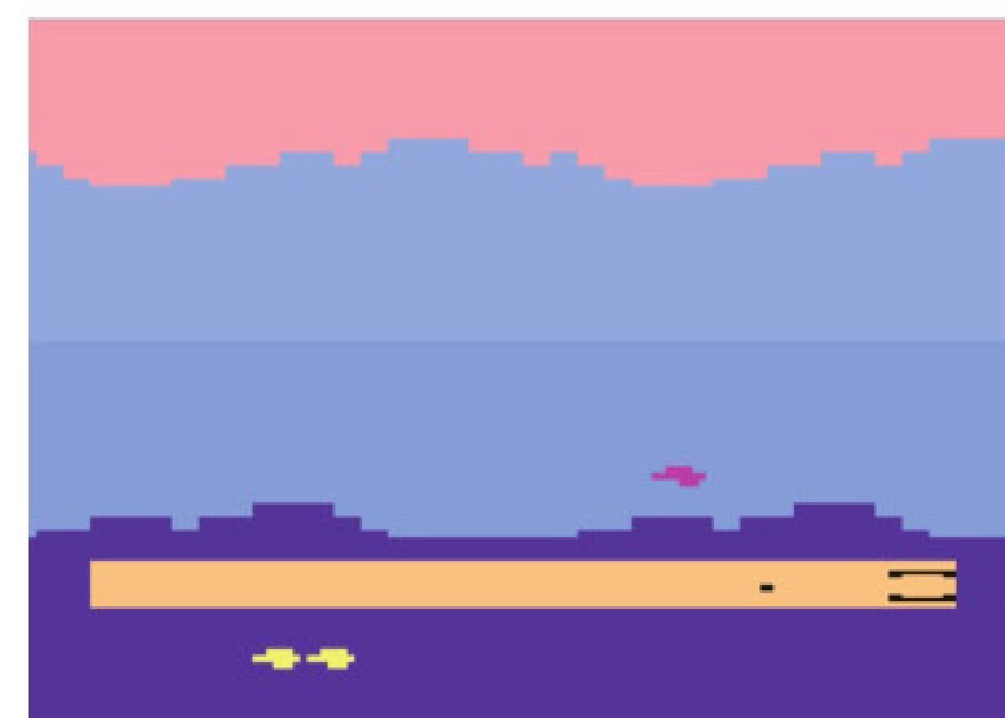
Although Lucasfilm had opened its own game development division in 1982, George Lucas's house of coders was actually unable to create its own *Star Wars* games at that time, since the brand had been licensed out to other publishers prior to Lucasfilm Games' formation. Atari had secured the arcade license and was due to release its groundbreaking wireframe shooter in 1983, but it was Parker Brothers who gained the home console rights and actually ended up releasing the world's first *Star Wars* game, curiously based upon the second film.

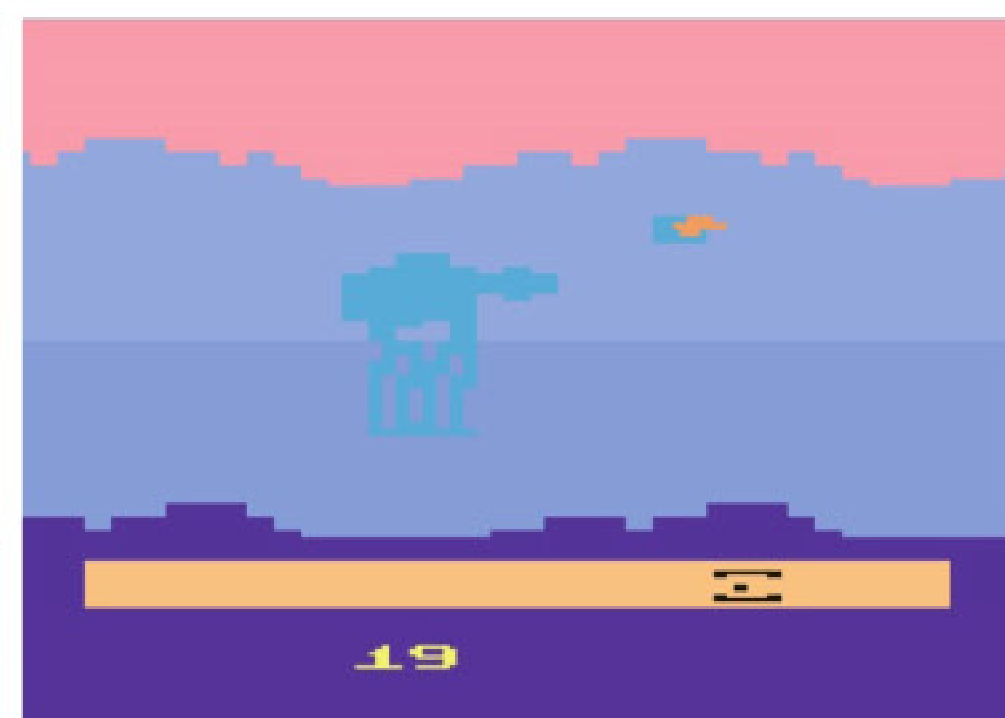
> AS MOVIE LICENSES WENT, THERE WERE FEW MORE POPULAR THAN STAR WARS

In charge of bringing that game to life was Rex Bradford, an "avid science fiction reader" who had "seen the original *Star Wars* movie something like ten times." Despite his love for the source material, however, Bradford hadn't joined Parker Brothers with the intention of making a *Star Wars* game, and wasn't even that interested in videogames at all. "I was a board game fanatic growing up, both as a player and as a budding inventor," he reveals. At the University of Massachusetts, I taught myself CONTINUED >.



Shoot an AT-AT enough and its power generator will be revealed. It's effectively a weak spot, and if you're lucky enough to hit it then the whole thing will go down.







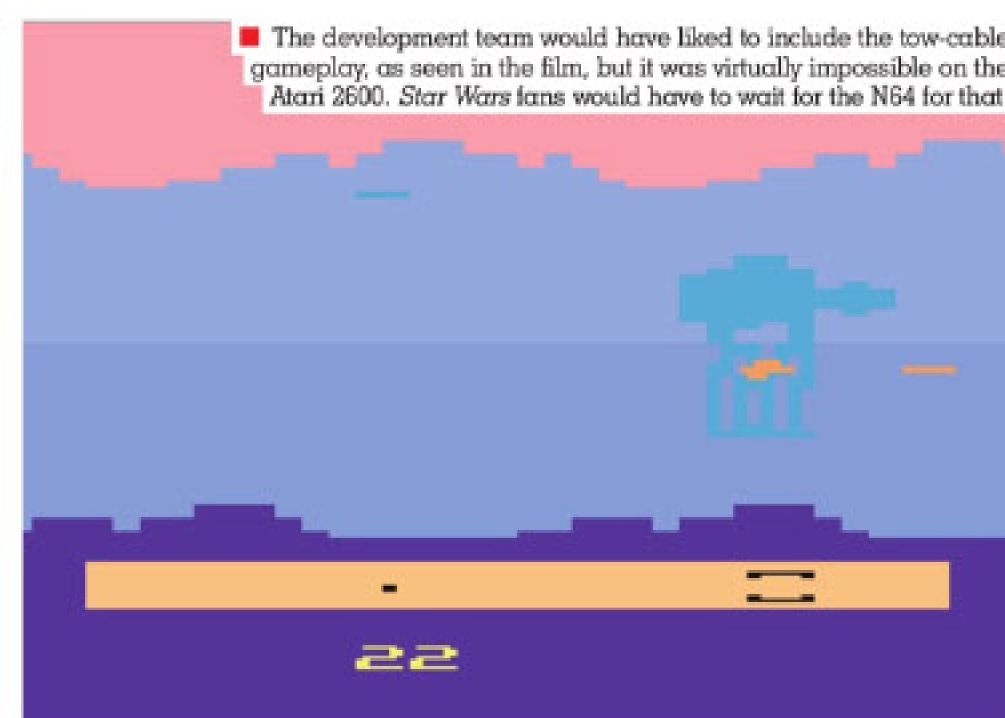


Both enemy and player changed colour depending on how much damage they took. It was a clever way of representing health without cluttering the screen with energy bars.

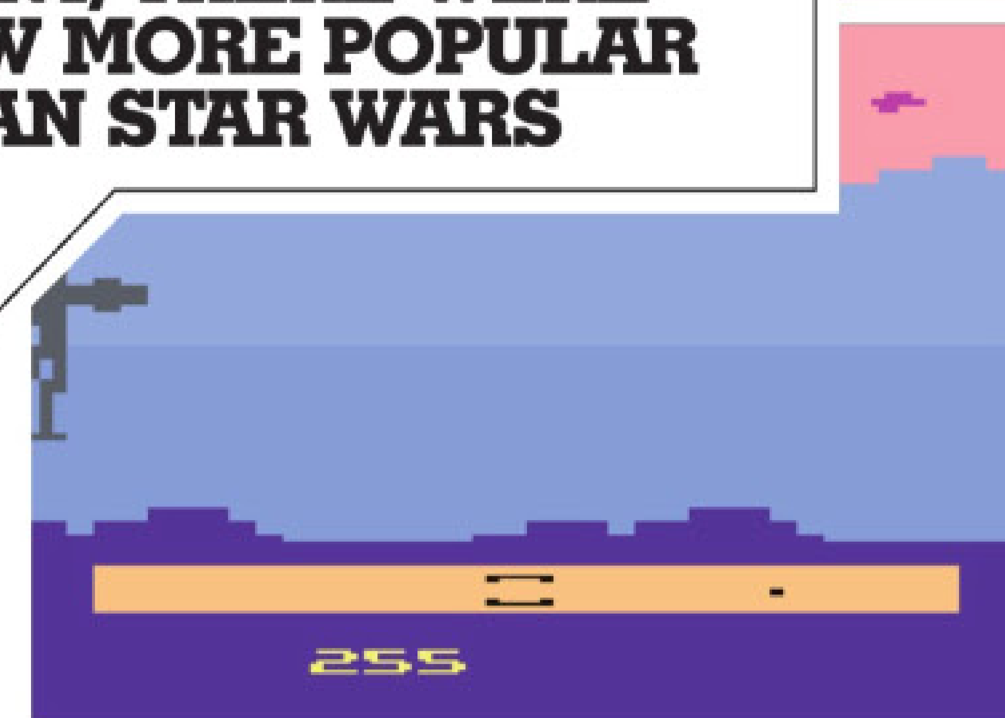


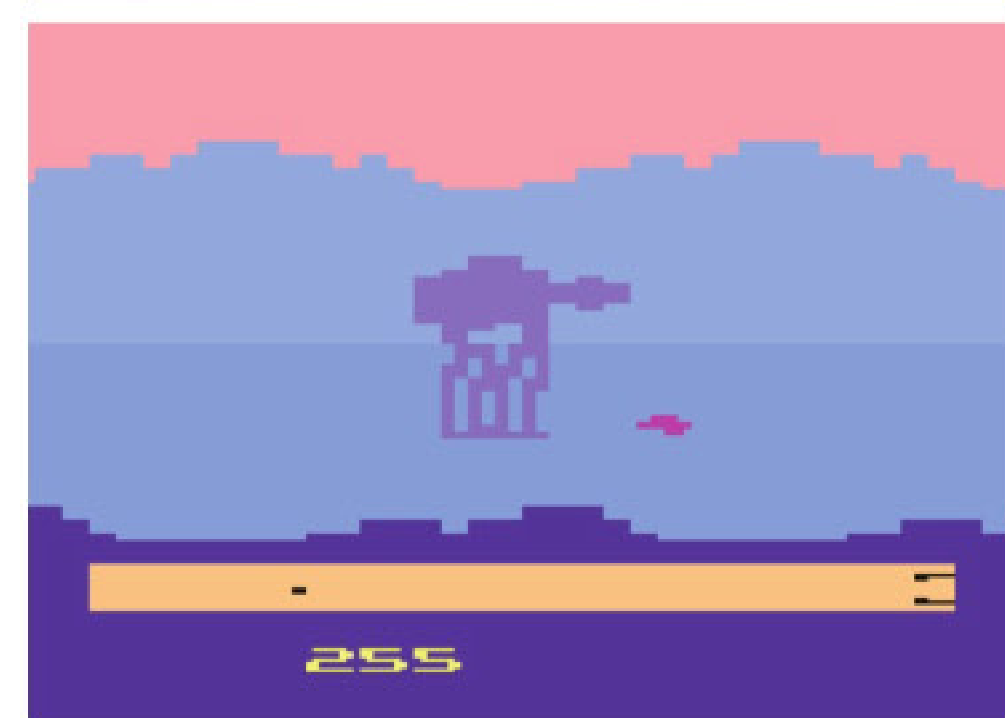






The development team would have liked to include the tow-cable gameplay, as seen in the film, but it was virtually impossible on the Atari 2600. *Star Wars* fans would have to wait for the N64 for that.







FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: BINARYROOSTER

It was one of the first times I remember a videogame actually resembling the film it was supposed to be based on. For a 2600 game, it was quite atmospheric, with the relentless march of the AT-ATs giving it a sense of ominous urgency. Recharging your shields by landing was a great touch, and getting temporary invincibility when you 'used the force' made for a great few seconds of unadulterated blasting. A truly impressive use of 4k of memory.

Posted by: THE HAWK

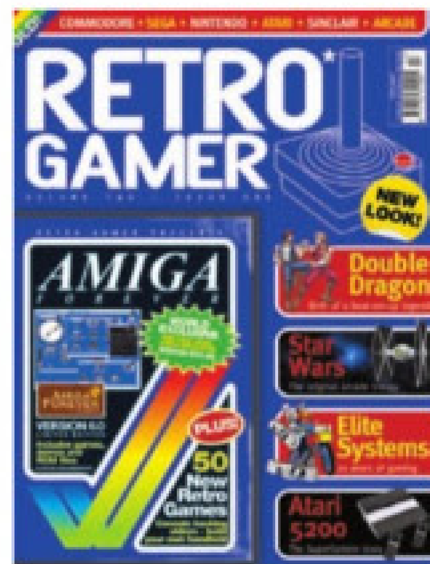
Well, it was the first game I remember that had bosses that turned a different colour when you shot them so you knew you were making progress. I thought that was very cool, though I was only about seven or eight at the time. I also remember it being a lot less flickery version of *Defender*. When I bought a 2600 off eBay for seven quid this year, I was absolutely delighted to see a boxed copy of *Empire Strikes Back* in perfect condition. I played it again and – you know what? – it still plays really, really well.

Posted by: COMMANDER JAMESON

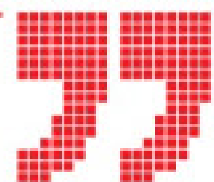
I love this game. Easy to draw parallels with *Defender*, but way cooler. It chugs along at a fair old pace, and when you're into it and those AT-ATs have sped up a bit, it's a real challenge. The colours were gorgeous, graphics basic but functional, but the whole game just plays... brilliantly. Its pace seemed to be over and above its peers (try playing *Combat* after an *ESB* session; it's like wading through treacle, and *Combat*'s a good game!). You always feel like you stand a chance and, when you die, you never feel robbed of a life. It's perfect risk/reward gameplay, hovering in front of an AT-AT pumping bullets into its face thinking, 'any nanosecond now, it's gonna shoot – DAMN!'



WHAT THEY SAID...



Based entirely around the AT-AT scene, this was a side-scrolling shooter that managed a remarkably solid job of recreating the Star Wars vehicles using 2600's limited resources.
Retro Gamer, Issue 13

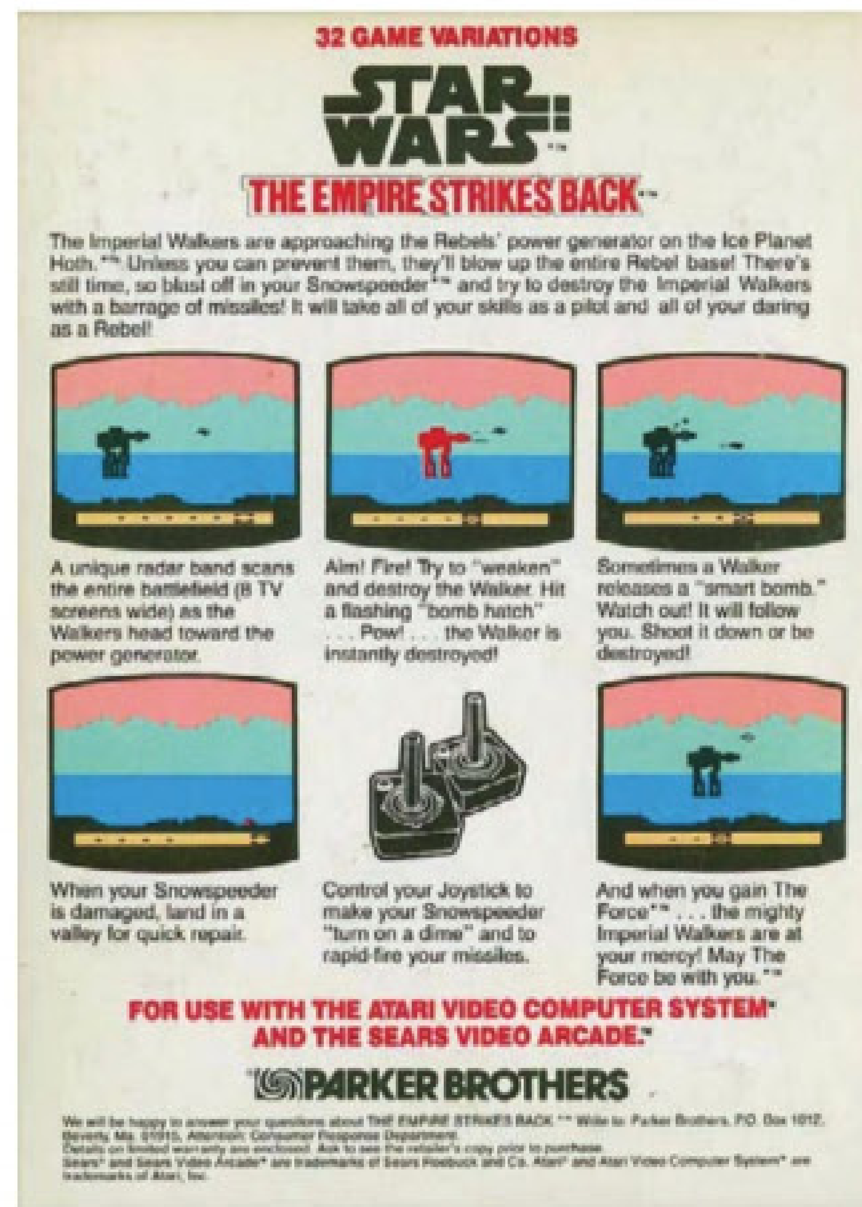


programming, but didn't write any games per se. Then when soon out of school I saw an ad to make electronic games at Parker Brothers, makers of *Monopoly*, *Risk* and *Cluedo*." Bradford jumped at the chance to work on some of those classic board game properties but found himself working on videogames instead. "I got hired to work on electronic games, but happened to be in the right place at the right time when they made the move to make Atari games. I got the nod to be the programmer for their first game, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and that launched me into video and computer games as a career."

Parker had acquired the rights to *The Empire Strikes Back* thanks to the negotiations of marketing manager Bill Bracy, before Bradford arrived at the company; inevitably, some ideas for the game had already been "batted around by the folks in marketing". "It was an easy decision to focus on the Hoth battle so the basic scene/activity was set early on," Bradford adds. "Within that, the goal was to make the game fast-paced and fun to play foremost, and also evoke imagery from the movie. Some ideas dropped by the wayside for lack of ability to pull them off including walker-roping and visually seeing the power generator and it being blown up. It was my first Atari game and perhaps it might have been possible to pull one or both of these off, but the Atari was very crude and I'm not sure even with more experience they would have been possible."

Bradford was one of only two people on the *Empire Strikes Back* development team, with each member taking on multiple responsibilities, as was the trend at such an early stage in the industry's history. "Sam Kjellman got picked to be the game's designer, and me its programmer, something of a far cry from 100-plus game development staffs these days. There was no spec per se - Sam came up with most of the basic play mechanics, though I participated in those and also eagerly took on the role of doing the stuff that's hard to spec - the camera algorithm and parallax effect, general speed and tuning issues, et cetera. So it was something of a joint effort in that sense. Sam also did the graphics, and I did all the sound. The sound was pretty much trial-and-error, playing around with the sound registers and trying to get a sense for what combinations made what kinds of sounds. I programmed the graphics, so there was a little back and forth there in terms of what we could achieve, but Sam did the artwork."

BEFORE ANY OF this work could begin, however, Bradford had to get to grips with the arcane Atari hardware, and as this was the first ever videogame to come from Parker Brothers, it was a learning experience for the whole company, with some embarrassing mistakes made along the way. "I wrote a dis-assembler to examine other games' assembly code, while Parker hired an outside company to photograph the graphics chip, with the plastic stripped off, so Mark Lesser, a talented Parker engineer and the inventor of the first handheld game for Mattel, could examine the circuit diagram. The first microphotographs came back very fuzzy. So then the contractor put the microscope onto a mercury bed, on the assumption that the fuzziness was due to vibration from nearby road traffic. That didn't help. Then someone discovered the Scotch Tape over the lens. True story."



> **THE GOAL WAS TO MAKE IT FAST-PACED AND FUN TO PLAY, AND TO EVOKE THE MOVIE**

Comedy errors aside, creating 2600 games was no laughing matter. "Programming the Atari was all about managing extremely serious constraints on graphics, memory, and execution time," says Bradford on what is undoubtedly the most difficult console there has ever been to develop for. "The walkers were done with sprite magnification - x4 for the body and x2 for the legs," he elaborates. "The exploding bombs were done by blowing up a missile to x8 and then jiggling its position around quickly. The parallax view, such as it was, and the camera motion in particular I spent a fair amount of time tuning to get the feel of speed, and also afford maximum screen space for attacking the walkers."

"My single biggest technical regret is that I didn't try harder to update the snowspeeder's graphics to change every line, instead of every other line. On the Atari, the sprite has a single-line data register that you have to update as the electronic gun scans down the tv screen, in order to make anything other than a block. You also have to do other things like position the sprites and missiles, and turn them on and off on the fly. So it becomes a big logic puzzle to write the 'display code' to manage this, with 76 processor cycles per line to work with. I'm not sure it would have been possible to get a better-resolution snowspeeder and still do everything else, but after having gained more Atari experience since, I think it might be."

With the game nearing completion, Bradford took *The Empire Strikes Back* to San Francisco – to demo to Lucasfilm – and was pleasantly surprised by the company's reaction. "I showed it to some of the graphics geniuses there – Ed Catmull, Alvy Ray Smith, Loren Carpenter. I was in awe of these people; they invented the 'shader languages' that are now embedded in Xbox hardware among many other innovations, and I was pretty intimidated to show them my little blocky game. But they were kind and reasonably impressed; I think they understood the limitations."

DORK HELMET

To say that the Atari 2600 was difficult to program for would definitely be an understatement, and to demonstrate that there's no finer example than Rex Bradford's initial experiments with the hardware. Approached by Bill Bracy to create a *Star Wars* game, Bradford created a test image to prove that recognisable movie-based sprites were possible on the system. After two days of work he produced a huge bust of Darth Vader, which filled the screen and impressed Bracy with its superior colour and shading. Pleasantly surprised with the results, Bracy asked what Bradford could do with the image but was disappointed to hear that nothing was possible at all. "I've used up all the space," he replied.

IF LUCASFILM WAS happy with the near-finished product then you have to assume that *The Empire Strikes Back* was cleared for take off, but Bradford's bubble was soon burst by criticism much closer to home. "There was a time when I was feeling like the game was coming out really well, but the marketing people were not as happy. Something was missing, they felt. Then one day I was bored and decided to switch to putting in some sound effects, which I hadn't done yet. The game was at that point silent. The next day, the word was that the game was fantastic – what did you do Rex? – and it should get put into a box as soon as possible."

When *The Empire Strikes Back* was finally released, two years after the film on which it was based, it became a phenomenal success. This was bound to happen because of the popularity of the license, of course, but the game also happened to be highly playable. As a more accessible and more attractive alternative to *Defender*, it combined wide appeal with a solid gameplay foundation and became one of the best movie based games of the era in the process. Unsurprisingly, it still pops up in Atari 2600 top-ten lists today, and continues to be a staple part of any Atari fan's collection.



Parker Brothers released five *Star Wars* games for the Atari 2600, two of which were programmed by Rex Bradford, but none came close to the glory of *The Empire Strikes Back*.

28 years on, Rex Bradford remains well aware of the love for his first videogame, and can't help but get a little nostalgic himself when we ask about the game's lasting impact. "I was pleased but not that surprised," he says of the game's popularity. "I knew the game had come out well, and with the *Star Wars* license that pretty much ensured at least some amount of success. There's still interest in that game and in the Atari 2600. I've watched the videogame industry grow over the last 30 years, and it's been an amazing ride. To some extent I miss the old days when one or a few people could build an entire game in a period of months; there was a lot of personal satisfaction that came with that. On the other hand, of course, today's games are so amazing comparatively. The nostalgia and interest around the 2600 is understandable given that this was the dawn of what has turned into a pretty important entertainment genre. It was fun to be there in the early days."



REX BRADFORD
Programmer

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Eugene Jarvis's 1980 classic, *Defender*, formed the template for *The Empire Strikes Back's* AT-AT-attack side-scrolling gameplay.



It took a further 14 years before a better Hoth battle was realised in the N64's tow-cable-endowed *Shadows Of The Empire*.



TOY STORY
Nintendo's Pre-Mario Entertainment

Before Nintendo became a global household name, it already had a rich history producing fun and, in some cases, downright wacky toys and games. You may have heard about the Love Tester or Ultra Hand, but few in the West are aware of just how broad Nintendo's output was in this period, and the extent to which this shaped the Nintendo of today

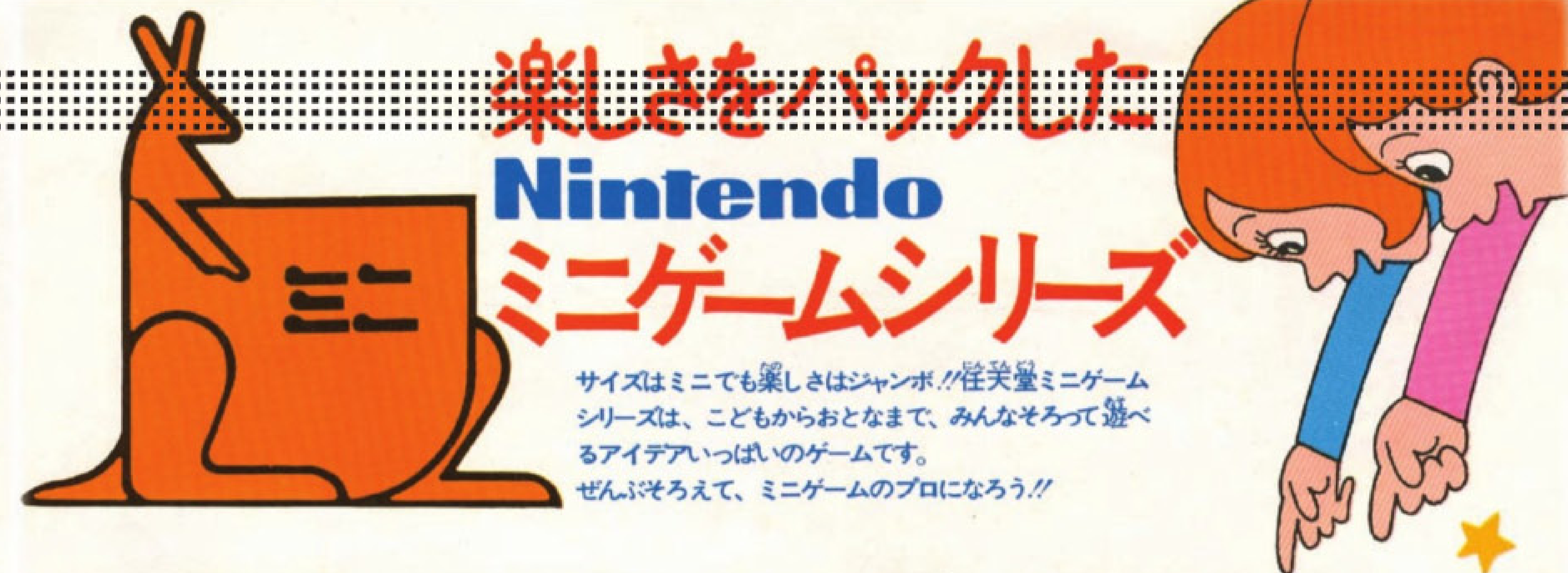
NINTENDO IS ONE of the grand old ladies of the Japanese game industry. Established in 1889, it spent the majority of its first 75 years producing Japanese-style hanafuda cards and Western-style playing cards. The phenomenal ongoing global success Nintendo has had from the early 1980s onward – in handhelds (starting with the introduction of the Game & Watch in 1980), in arcades (*Donkey Kong*, 1981) and at home (Famicom, 1983) – often overshadows the period that preceded it. This 'toy period', which lasted roughly from 1965 to 1980, is a pivotal period in Nintendo's past. It is the missing link of corporate history that connects the hanafuda cards to the birth of the videogame hardware and software that would follow.

The company culture established in the Sixties and Seventies provided the fertile ground from which their future growth bloomed. Important elements of the Nintendo philosophy of game development were nurtured in this period: fostering creativity and experimentation in design and a willingness to take this to the market, coupled with quality in execution and a focus on products that were really fun to play with. Nintendo's staff is known to stay at the company for decades, and a number of the key figureheads from its videogame days, including Shigeru Miyamoto and Gunpei Yokoi, started out in the toy period, getting their first design experience developing these toys.

The majority of Nintendo's toys and games did not make it beyond the borders of Japan, as Nintendo didn't really start to market internationally until the Eighties. As a result, even though many did well in their home market at the time – some selling over a million units – most of what is shown here is still quite obscure and unknown in Western territories. Some of these toys you may recognize from cameos in a number of recent videogames, in particular the *WarioWare* series, in which, conscious of the company legacy, Nintendo designers have created a number of homages to these ancient relics.

FROM A COLLECTOR'S point of view, this period is largely uncharted water. A small community of collectors of these vintage toys exists, but detailed information is scarce and availability outside Japan is limited. Even in Japan, many of these toys are very hard to find. As interest in the West is picking up, in recent years some Japanese sellers have expanded their working grounds to eBay. However, people interested in acquiring the more obscure items would best try their luck on the Japanese auction site Yahoo Japan. A little understanding of Japanese is necessary during your search, as toy names are mostly in Japanese.

The number of people hunting for these items is still relatively small. Prices are mostly acceptable and generally much lower than those commanded by the Nintendo collector items from the early Eighties (the high prices paid for Game & Watchs being an example). Many toys can still be had for a handful of yen (¥500 to ¥5,000) – if you can find them, that is. They are more rare than expensive, so you will need a lot of patience and perseverance rather than much pocket money to get started on a collection. The most rare and sought-after items can go up to ¥50,000 – or in some cases even ¥100,000 – but those are the exceptions. CONTINUED >.





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任天堂株式会社
京都・東京・大阪・名古屋・札幌

Ultra Hand (1966)

AROUND THE MID-SIXTIES, Nintendo had established a games department and was producing mostly traditional board games. Some of these were using a recently acquired license to feature Disney characters as well as Japanese TV figures. Nintendo was already well known as a card manufacturer, but was a small fry in the general toy market when compared to other companies like Epoch and Bandai.

Nintendo needed something to put itself on the map in the toy area, and the first toy designed in 1966 by Gunpei Yokoi (see boxout) provided this much-needed recognition. Selling for ¥600 (£4.60), the Ultra Hand was a plastic toy that could be expanded and contracted by moving the handles. The 'hands' at the end could be closed to grab an item. Although having mostly novelty value, it became a great success and more than a million were sold between 1966 and 1970, making it Nintendo's first million seller. The toy came with three balls with stands, which could be used to practice.

Recently, the Ultra Hand has been featured in a WiiWare game called *Grill-Off With Ultra Hand!*, available to Club Nintendo members in Japan and the USA. In this version, the Wii Remote and Nunchuk are used to simulate the handles of the Ultra Hand.





Yokoi's Ultra Machine capitalised on Japan's national obsession with baseball and suitably sold in healthy numbers.

Ultra Machine (1967)

FOLLOWING THE CREATION of the Ultra Hand, Gunpei Yokoi was set to work on a follow-up that would equal its success. Baseball has long been popular in Japan – fostering a popularity not dissimilar to that which it has in the United States – and a toy related to the sport turned out to be a good idea.

THE EXCUSE THE TOY BROUGHT TO HOLD HANDS WAS PART OF ITS SUCCESS

The Ultra Machine was introduced in 1967 for a retail price of ¥1,480. It was the first battery-operated Nintendo toy, and contains a small electromotor, running on a single D-cell, that drives a rotating arm, slinging ping pong balls at the player. The player returns the balls using a retractable plastic baseball bat. The speed and angle at which the balls shoot towards the player can be adjusted, and small indentations in the balls give them effect, making the hitting of the balls quite challenging.

The toy proved another success for Nintendo, further cementing its ambition as a toy manufacturer. It remained a good seller for many years and, in the early Seventies, was slightly redesigned with a more contemporary, rounded look. The Ultra Machine featured in GBA's *WarioWare, Inc.* is based on this updated version.

Unusually for a Nintendo toy, the Ultra Machine saw limited export to Australia under the name of Slugger Mate.



Love Tester (1969)

IN 1969, A Nintendo toy aimed at a more mature market saw the light of day. Advertised to be "for young ladies and men", the Electronic Love Tester was another brainchild of Gunpei Yokoi. It retailed for ¥1,800 and ran on a single AA battery.

To use the toy, a couple would hold hands with one another while holding one of the two metal cups each. The meter in the Love Tester then indicated the 'level of love' that existed between the couple, using a scale of 0 to 100.

Although the simple circuitry in the toy most likely only measured the level of conductivity of the couple, rather than love, this did not stop the toy from bringing Nintendo another hit. In the Sixties in Japan, dating etiquette was still pretty strict, and the excuse the toy brought to hold hands and break the ice was surely part of its success. The Love Tester was also the first Nintendo item to contain electronics, albeit quite rudimentary tech.



Ultra Scope (1971)

THE CHALLENGE FOR every toy maker is coming up with toys that appeal to children and that parents will buy. The third of the Ultra series was another item coveted by children and executed well by Nintendo: the Automatic Ultra Scope, introduced in 1971 for a retail price of ¥2,980. It did not repeat the sales success of its two predecessors, but still sold decently.

Based on the periscopes used in warfare (in particular submarines), with two mirrors at a 45-degree angle, this toy allows viewing over tall crowds and around corners without being spotted. The top mirror is mounted on a five-piece retractable arm, which, when fully extended, stood around 80 centimetres high. The movement of the arm is driven by a motor running on two C-cells. The upwards and downwards movement causes a nice whirring sound and the automated extending of the arm is very satisfying.

In what is possibly the result of a bad translation job, the first batch of toys was adorned with the English term 'Ultracope' (the 's' somehow becoming lost in translation). This was subsequently corrected in later production runs.



The Ultra Scope helped Japanese youngsters indulge their voyeuristic urges without being caught. In theory.

Beam Gun series (1970-1976)



AROUND 1970, LIGHT-SENSITIVE electronics (solar cells) were still fairly new. Manufacturers of these elements were looking for new ways to apply them, thus extending their customer base. One of the companies that produced them was Sharp, and one of their sales staff, Masayuki Uemura, visited Nintendo and met with Gunpei Yokoi. Not only did this meeting result in a series of new toys, but Mr. Uemura eventually moved over to Nintendo where he came to head up one of the hardware design groups.

Sharp's solar cell would be used in the Beam Gun series: toy guns that emitted a short flash of light when 'fired', and targets equipped with a solar cell would register the light (when aimed correctly) and show the hit in various fashions. The 'jumping bottle' target would spring into two parts, held together by an electromagnet until hit by the light from the gun. Other targets included a roulette that would spin, a lion that would roar and wildlife scenes with exotic birds or animals of prey collapsing upon each hit. All guns and targets are battery operated.

With this series, introduced in 1970, Nintendo created something for the entire family, to be enjoyed by children and adults together (well, fathers and their sons, probably). Around this time, electronic games started to become mainstream, even though the retail prices were still considerable, ranging from ¥980 for a simple plastic gun to ¥14,000 (£106) for a rifle made from metal and wood. Targets cost between ¥2,500 and ¥7,800. These prices notwithstanding, Nintendo had another blockbuster on its hands, selling into the hundreds of thousands of the various guns and targets of the series.

In 1975, the Beam Gun series was rejuvenated with two great new targets: Custom Gunman and Custom Lion. These were sold in sets containing both gun and target for ¥7,500. As the name suggests, these feature a gunman or lion that would collapse dramatically when hit. After a short time lying dead, by means of a clever mechanism inside the toy, they would automatically spring back to life, ready to take the next shot.



Gunpei Yokoi: Toy Commander

Although Nintendo gradually amassed a staff of talented designers and engineers, one name stands above the rest in terms of influence and impact on the company in the period between 1965 and 1980: Gunpei Yokoi.

An engineer on Nintendo's hanafuda card manufacturing line, his talent was spotted by then Nintendo chairman Hiroshi Yamauchi, and put to use in the games department. He single-handedly created many of the items featured here, and some more not shown. An inventor by nature, he was always looking for new ideas and new uses of technology, and continued to play a very important role, developing Game & Watch and – his masterpiece – the Game Boy. He was also involved in software, producing *Metroid* and *Super Mario Land*.

Yokoi left Nintendo in 1996, after over 30 years, and started Koto Laboratory, which was involved in the design of Bandai's Wonder Swan. His departure from Nintendo is often linked to the failure of the Virtual Boy. However, Yokoi himself has stated that he resigned to find a new environment similar to the smaller Nintendo of the past, and that he even stayed on longer than he had planned, as he wanted to leave on a high note. His last project at Nintendo was a redesign of the Game Boy, which resulted in the Game Boy Pocket.

In 1997, Yokoi died in a car accident, aged only 56.



Light Telephone (1972)

■ THE LIGHT TELEPHONE must be one of the most unorthodox of Gunpei Yokoi's ideas to make it into production (the Chiritori being another candidate). It is another creative use of a solar cell.

The fact that it was released shows that Nintendo was willing to try almost anything at this point in time – and, of course, great success seldom comes without taking risk. However, the fact that it only worked well at night and the price tag of ¥9,800 meant that it was not really suited as a children's toy. Its appeal will have been limited to a novelty for adults. It is not known exactly how well this one fared, but it will most likely not have sold in significant numbers, contributing to its current rarity.

The idea of using light to transport sound was intriguing though. The set contained two 'Light Telephones', consisting of a headphone and a handpiece with a microphone that resembles a standard torch. The sound that the microphone picks up is coded into the transmitted light, decoded again by the receiving party's handpiece using the solar cell, and played over the headphones. This created, in effect, a two-way walky talky without the use of radio waves. Under the right conditions (not too much sun light, two sets perfectly aligned) it works surprisingly well for distances of between 10 and 30 metres. It contained, for the time, quite elaborate electronics and expensive parts, which is the main reason for the high retail price.



Duck Hunt (1976)

■ THE FAMILIAR NES *Duck Hunt* is actually a remake of sorts. The original Duck Hunt was released almost a decade earlier. After the success of the Beam Gun series, Nintendo created a number of arcade games around light guns. One of the more spectacular was called Laser Clay. For these games, Nintendo converted former bowling alleys (bowling had become less popular at the time) into light shooting ranges, with clay pigeons being projected on screens (regular white screens, not TV screens). These games included a clever mechanism that would notice the projected pigeon being hit by the light gun.

With Duck Hunt, released as a standalone game in 1976, Nintendo created a home version of this clay shooting experience. The battery-operated game retailed for ¥9,500, and contained a light gun and a device that projected flying ducks on the wall of a darkened room. This device also detected hits by the light gun. Upon registering a hit, it would show the bird dramatically tumbling down. The mechanism was simple but effective, demonstrating a typically efficient design from Nintendo. It works remarkably well in recreating a shooting experience, considering that the toy does not contain a single microchip and is using an ordinary light bulb as its light source.

IT WAS EXPENSIVE TOO – ¥48,000 FOR A MACHINE THAT ONLY PLAYED OTHELLO

Color TV Games (1977-1979)

■ BEFORE NINTENDO RELEASED the Family Computer in 1983, it had already released five home-use TV videogame machines in the Japanese market. Though successful, contrary to the other Nintendo toys and games of the era, not too much effort was put into creating a unique experience. For the most part, these machines copied concepts developed by Atari.

Atari's home version of *Pong* was released during the holiday season of 1975, and in 1977 Nintendo was ready to take a slice of the *Pong* clone pie when it released the 'Color TV Game 6' and 'Color TV game 15', offering 6 and 15 *Pong*-style game variants respectively, for retail prices of ¥9,800 and ¥15,000.

The machines were co-developed by Sharp (which later also released the Twin Famicom) and did not prominently feature Nintendo branding on the casing. Slightly improved versions of the machines were released soon for reduced prices, sporting colours different to the first releases.

These first TV Games were followed by two slightly more original creations: 'Color TV Game Racing 112' (1978, ¥12,500) and 'Color TV Game Block Kuzushi' (1979, ¥13,500). Racing 112 is a racing game that could be played by a single player using the provided steering wheel, or by two players using the paddles. The number 112 refers to the number of possible game variants that can be achieved by changing some parameters like speed, car size or oil slicks. Block Kuzushi is clearly inspired by *Breakout*, and featured six game variants with some original ideas. It is is also noted for being the first home videogame with clear Nintendo branding on the casing. The overall art design of the casing and control panel was done by none other than a young Shiguru Miyamoto, in one of his earliest assignments at Nintendo.

■ These *Pong* inspired game systems showed little of the innovation that Nintendo would later demonstrate in the videogame field.



Chiritori (1979)



■ IN THE EARLY 1970s, a series of remote controlled cars had been released by Nintendo (called 'Lefty RX'). These used a rudimentary single-button radio wave control mechanism, allowing the car to start and stop. Steering was not an option: the 'left' in the name refers to the fact that the front wheels of the cars were fixed going to the left side, meaning the cars would always run in circles.

A similar radio control mechanism would be used for another unlikely toy: Chiritori (meaning 'dustpan'), released in 1979 for ¥5,800. This is a remote controlled, battery operated mini vacuum cleaner. It measures a mere 16 centimetres across, with a small fan providing dust-sucking action. Although it can actually vacuum a little, this is not really intended for serious cleaning. It would take you all day to do a single room.

When switched on, Chiritori starts running in a straight line. Pressing the button on the remote makes it spin in place (always clockwise). This allows it to be negotiated in any direction, but it is quite tricky and requires practice. Chiritori did not become a big seller and was produced in small quantities, making it one of the rarest toys these days.

Computer TV Game (1980)



■ IN 1980, A home videogame was released that was based on the Computer Othello arcade machine which Nintendo released two years earlier.

Technology wasn't really ready for this kind of home release, but Nintendo went ahead anyway, believing there would be a market for it. The company achieved the conversion by simply incorporating a complete arcade board, resulting in a big, heavy machine that required a fat power supply that weighed more than 2 kilograms alone. It was expensive too, retailing for ¥48,000 (£365) – all for a machine that could only play Othello. Three years later, the Family Computer could be bought for less than a third of that price.

Unsurprisingly, the machine was sold and produced in limited quantities. These are rarely offered for sale and command high prices. After years of absence, one finally surfaced on eBay last year – and sold for a whopping $2,000.

Computer Mah-jong Yakuman (1982)

■ COMPUTER MAH-JONG YAKUMAN was released in 1982, two years after the introduction of the first Game & Watch games. Like most of the toys featured here, it did not see a Western release. It was aimed at the adult market and did not use the Game & Watch series name (it also did not include a clock function). Like Game & Watch, it used an LCD display.

The gameplay was more elaborate than the typical LCD games of the time, as it included a full Mah-jong game. This was reflected in the retail price of ¥16,800, which was around three times the price of a Game & Watch. The game could be played against the computer or head-to-head against another live player, using a separately available cable and a second unit. This cable was the first electronic game link cable, predating the Game Boy link by 7 years.



THE ODD ONES OUT

■ BECAUSE OF THE success of the toys featured here, Nintendo became more and more established as a premier toy and game maker. However, before eventually focussing fully on videogames, in the early 1970s it did still try to branch into other areas as well, as some of the examples pictured here show. Most of these were relatively small one-off successes at best, which did not develop into whole categories of products.



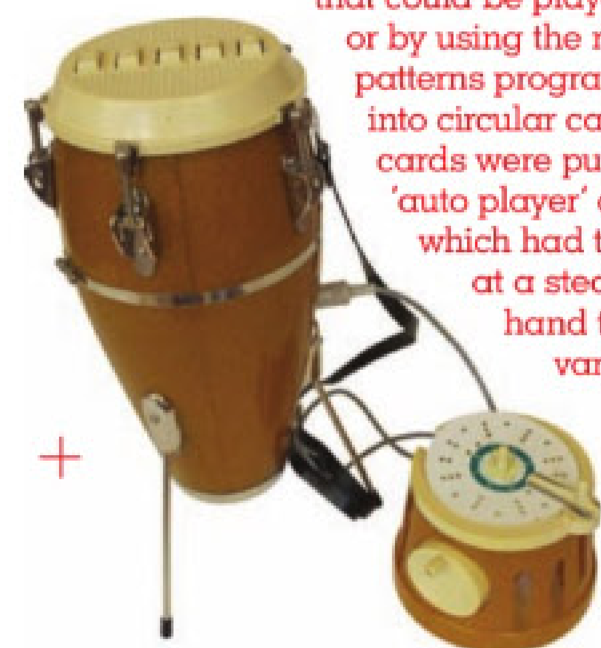
CANDY MACHINE (1970) – used for making candyfloss at home. Came with a small Nintendo-branded bag of sugar.



COPYLAS (1971) – an early copy machine for small offices, using ultraviolet light and a procedure similar to that used in Xerox copiers.



TWINS (1971) – a playground balance toy for babies and small children.




ELECONGA (1972) – an electronic beat box that could be played by hand or by using the rhythm patterns programmed into circular cards. These cards were put into the 'auto player' accessory, which had to be turned at a steady pace by hand to produce various dance beats.



BEST BOSS

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI MEGA DRIVE [Sega] 1989

■ Who would win in a fight between a ninja and Godzilla? It's a question that had plagued the minds of mankind for years before Sega's rock-hard sequel gave us a succinct answer. It's Godzilla. While the shrunken Tokyo-wrecker might look more like Godzuki than his famous uncle, it doesn't change the fact that the massive-but-not-quite-massive-enough beast can drop you in just two hits from his unpredictable flame breath, or a single swipe of his tail. Licensing issues unsurprisingly arose, leading to this evident knock-off being replaced by a skeletal dinosaur in later versions of the game, while the equally cheeky Batman cameo also got the chop, and the fake Spider-Man was elevated to a licensed appearance.



MONSTER IN MY POCKET: THE POKÉMON STORY

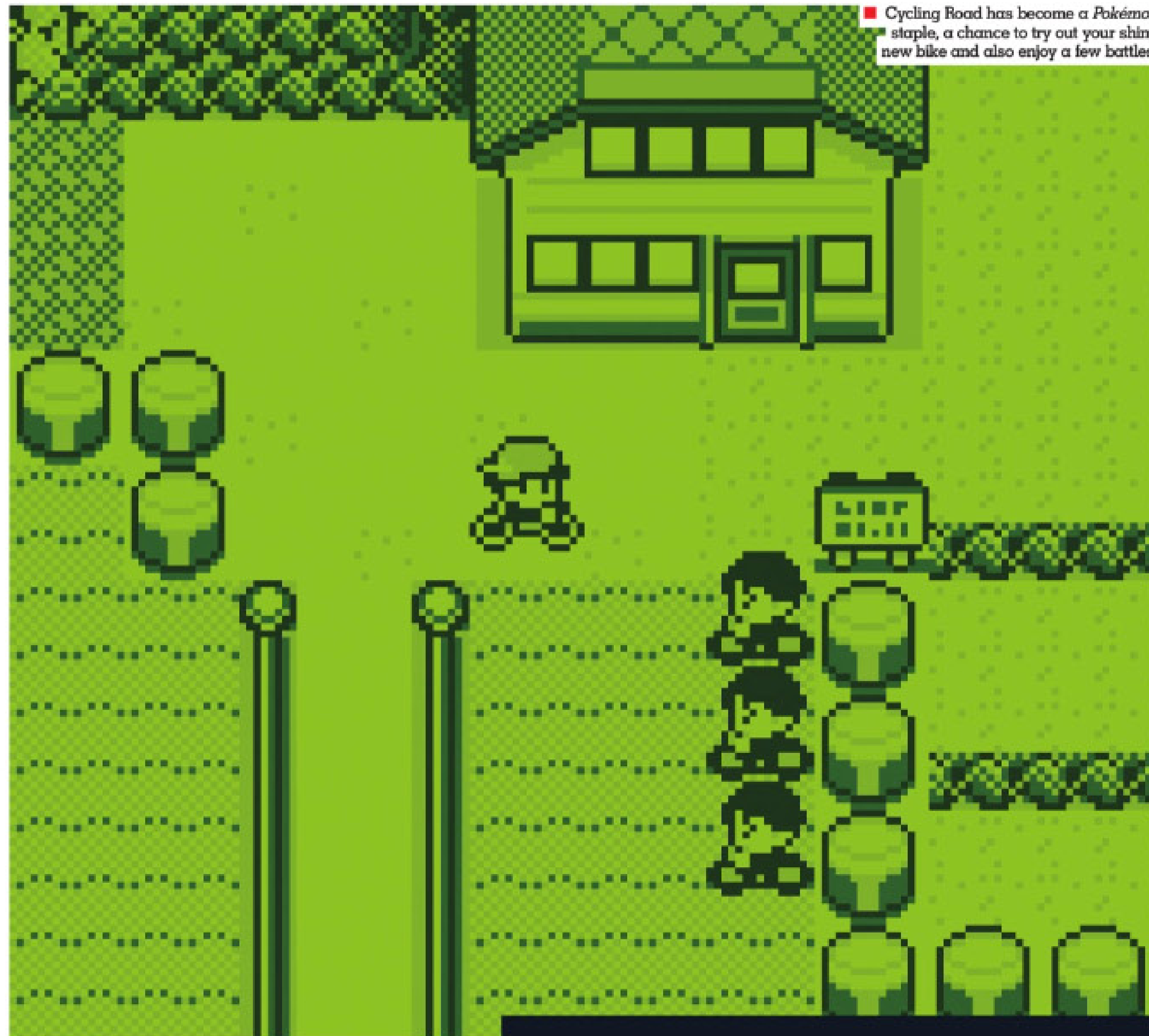
From a simple Game Boy acorn grew the mightiest oak in all of gaming, a cross-media sensation on a scale never seen before or even since. **games™** journeys east to speak with Game Freak about the birth and evolution of gaming's number one monster

ONE GAME. Two versions. Eight gyms. 151 monsters. However you crunch the numbers, 1996 was the Year of the Monster as Nintendo unleashed two versions of a game called *Pocket Monsters* upon the world for the first time, presumably as unaware as we were that it would go on to become one of the greatest gaming phenomena of all time. With support from an insanely popular anime series, a surprisingly engaging trading card game and more branded merchandise than any game has seen to this day, the Game Boy duo would go on to become the best-selling RPGs of all time. But our story doesn't begin there – it starts some 13 years previous to the release of the original games.

Game Freak might only have shot to fame when *Pokémon* became a household name, but both firm and name date way back to the Eighties. Some may know that the name itself comes from a 'magazine' that some of the founding members of the company used to produce; *Pokémon* art director Ken Sugimori takes us back in time to the birth of Game Freak as a videogame publication. "As you may know, Mr [Satoshi] Tajiri was the founder of *Game Freak* and I was a friend of his when I was a student. We used to play videogames together and that's how we started this company – Mr Tajiri started a company and I joined. Back in 1983, Mr Tajiri started selling this little booklet for ¥200 and it was sold only in very specialist bookstores," he explains, carefully thumbing through the handful of pages of the very first issue – hand-written on curious pastel-coloured paper, it's a piece of history we feel privileged to see. "Basically, it talked about strategies for arcade games because, at the time, there were no home consoles. Only very few people would visit these stores and see the book, but I was one of them. As we talked, we became friends and discussed how arcade games were often very similar – if we were developing them, what would we do differently?"

POKÉMON IS A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT THAT CAN BRING HAPPINESS ALL OVER THE WORLD

It's a conversation most gamers have had at some point, the 'we could do better' attitude CONTINUED >.



Cycling Road has become a *Pokémon* staple, a chance to try out your shiny new bike and also enjoy a few battles.

usually a product of seeing poor design choices rather than coding mishaps. While the average gamer wouldn't be able to program even a simple game, just about anyone who knows their games can easily come up with concepts and ideas that might seem like improvements over those made on certain games. Fortunately, despite the fact that Tajiri and Sugimori only had the ideas and the art side of things down, the help the duo would need to realise their developmental ideas was only a couple of issues away. "When we first started, some of the readers were actually programmers and they had the skills and access to the hardware – that's how we started in producing videogames," Sugimori tells us. "Then Mr Masuda joined and our first game was *Quinty*."

WE WANTED TO CREATE AN EXPERIENCE WHERE YOU CAN PLAY TOGETHER WITH FRIENDS

Quinty, or *Mendel Palace* as it was renamed for its Western release, was a quirky tile-based action game for the NES. Sadly, Game Freak's debut never made it to Europe. In fact, the firm released no less than ten games for various systems before it finally struck gold with *Pocket Monsters*, and of them, just one was released in Europe and it was arguably the firm's worst (the rather iffy *Mario & Yoshi* puzzle game for NES and Game Boy). But from the stylish action of *Pulseman* to the cutesy charm of *Smart Ball*, we can't honestly say that the signs were there that this studio would go on to create some of the most iconic characters of all time.

THE CONCEPT FOR *Pokémon* famously came about based on Tajiri's obsession with collecting insects as a child, the visionary creator looking to pass on his love of discovering and cataloguing strange creatures with a videogame based upon that very concept. And the project proved to be something of a labour of love. "It took about two years to come up with the 151 Pokémon," Sugimori tells us, though the project itself was apparently in the works for far longer. "It took about six years from the start of the concept to execution. We started the project right after *Quinty* was released and initially, we were aiming to have about fifty Pokémon. But every year, the technology improved so while it started at 50, by the end of about the fourth year we realised that we could do about 150 Pokémon. In that sense, I suppose we didn't really have a set target number – it just depended on the technology we had at the time." Technology would define the game far more as development continued, the ability to use link cables and share your monsters apparently a crucial factor in choosing the Game Boy as the platform for the games. And interestingly, it wasn't Game Freak's idea to release the game as two different versions – that marketing bombshell was dropped by one Shigeru Miyamoto when the game was taken in to show to Nintendo, the figurehead defining what *Pokémon* would be with a single suggestion. This major benefit to a portable platform apparently fuelled Game Freak's decision to put the concept on Game Boy in the first place, as Masuda explains. "*Pokémon* is all about communication and trading, so in that sense it has to be handheld."

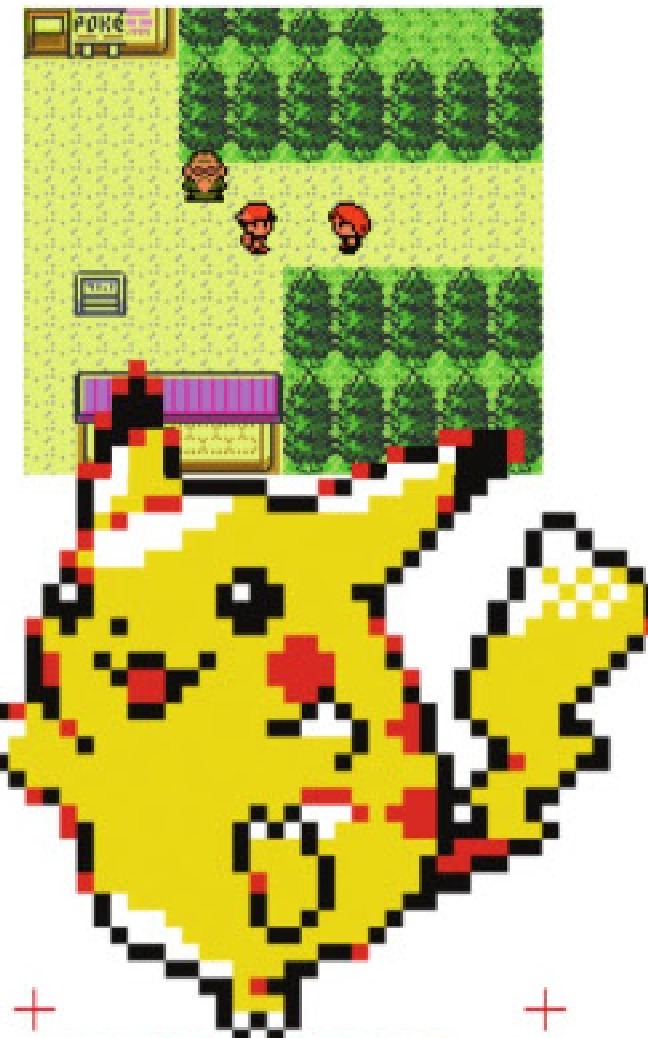
The three-year wait for the Japanese success story to reach European shores was all but inevitable, localisation on a game so text-heavy only partly to blame as the US version landed almost a year before we saw the games. Some stores went as far as importing the American version to sell on and grab business early, but, by the time we saw the domestic release, everything was already in place for the launch to be the beginning of a major offensive. And as the backlog of *Pokémon* material rolled out alongside the game of the moment, this was not just going to be a massive hit but a late boom for Nintendo's handheld near the end of its commercial life, link cables for the first time becoming a must-have accessory.

"People say that when you play videogames, you're usually playing on your own," states Masuda. "So we wanted to create an experience where you can play the game but still play together with friends at the same time and all have fun. That was the basic idea I had in my mind when working on this game. You can battle together and trade with friends and family – you could even take your game to a store, find someone you never met and ask them to trade Pokémon or play together." These central themes remain unchanged even over a decade on as Game Freak works on *Black* and *White*, albeit with the magic of wi-fi replacing the need for a bespoke cable and the monster count now well over 600.

STILL, BACK THEN 151 proved to be the magic number, just enough to seem like an overwhelming task on starting your quest to become a *Pokémon* master, yet still a realistic enough goal for the most devout collectors. It's this large and diverse cast of relatively simple characters that helped propel the franchise to such great heights, offering a degree of freedom and wonder within the games to set them apart from so many other RPGs, but at the same time giving *Pokémon* the chance to grow beyond the confines of a Game Boy cartridge and envelop the world.

Where most series might offer a handful of characters that could feasibly be turned into toys, plushes and action figures, each and every *Pokémon* has at some point been shrunken down and sold in toy form, the game's demanding slogan 'Gotta Catch 'Em All!' extending its reach outside of the game and turning a simple Game Boy title into a license to print money overnight. But even in its heyday, when you couldn't move for Pikachu's grinning face or *Pokémon*-branded tat that ranged from toothbrushes to breakfast cereal, Game Freak never lost sight of the fact that, while some people may not realise it, *Pokémon* is a game series first and foremost.

"Our company is primarily focused on developing videogames," states Junichi Masuda, currently director on the *Pokémon* series but more involved with the excellent audio side of things back around the time of the series' inception. "*Pokémon* was CONTINUED >.



PIKACHU, I (ALWAYS) CHOOSE YOU!

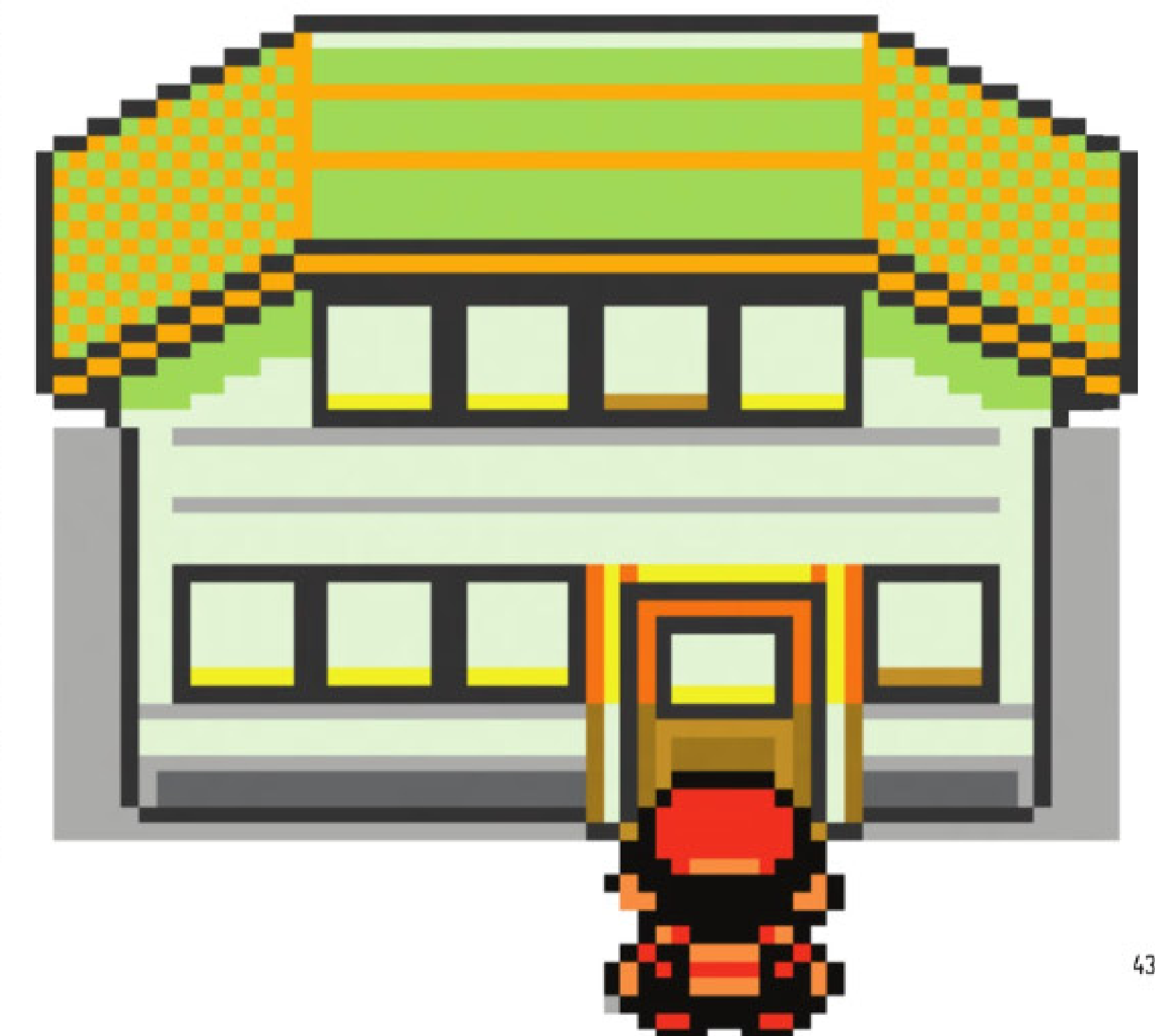
WHILE MANY SHUN the *Pokémon* anime simply on the grounds of it being a colourful cartoon obviously aimed at kids, and others condemn it rather more plausibly for its modest production values (read: crappy animation), we've always taken far more umbrage with Ash as a trainer. Even though the show has documented his rise to becoming a supposed master of his trade, he still makes decisions in battle that would get you smashed to bits if you made them in the main game. Most of these errors involve his reluctance to use any monster other than Pikachu at key times, sending the little yellow dude up against Ground types without a care and generally making a mockery of the game's battle system. We won't say we'd have rather have had it 100 per cent accurate, but to have the hero make such glaring blunders can't have taught kids much strategy for when they switched their Game Boys back on…

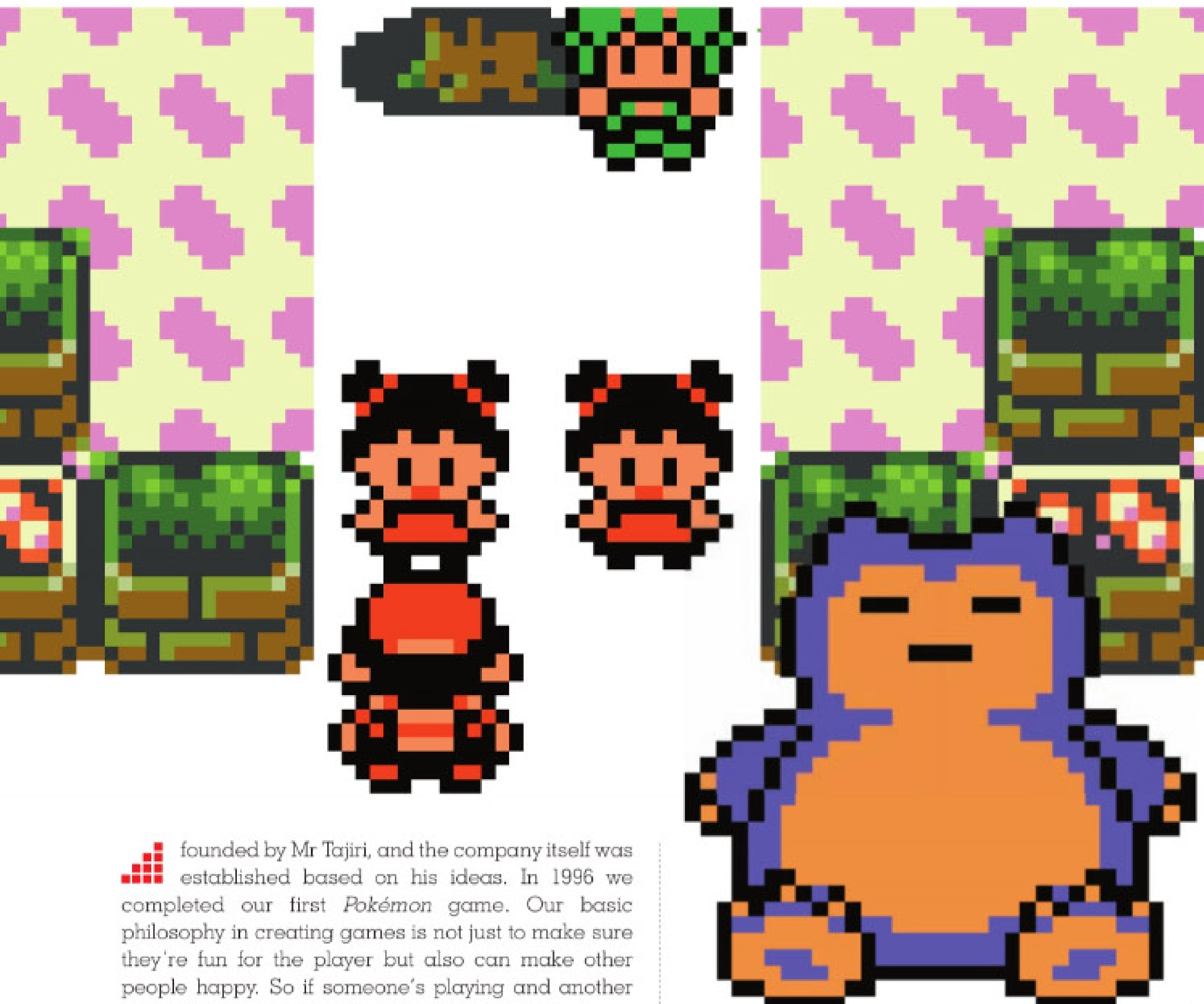


Gold and *Silver* introduced berries, and the concept has grown with each new game. Now, you can grow your own crops and often find rare berries held by wild Pokémon too.

Power Down

OFFICIAL MAGAZINES HAVE never exactly been at the forefront of review accuracy, but, while many expect to see inflated and sometimes undeserved scores for first party titles, Nintendo Power's review of *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* fell on quite the other side of the tracks. The duo was thrown away with a tiny review that offered less information than the back of the box and about as much informed opinion. What is widely celebrated as one of the greatest Game Boy games ever was awarded an overall score of just 7.2 by the US' official Nintendo magazine, the second-lowest score in the issue. The excellent music was bizarrely described as "cute but appropriate", with the action itself dismissed as "simply a matter of walking around and making menu selections". One reviewer even had the audacity to suggest that "serious role players may want to look elsewhere", though the magazine did at least have the decency to correct its error, naming the games the third-best on Game Boy in a list some time later.





founded by Mr Tajiri, and the company itself was established based on his ideas. In 1996 we completed our first *Pokémon* game. Our basic philosophy in creating games is not just to make sure they're fun for the player but also can make other people happy. So if someone's playing and another is watching, we want both of them to be happy. It's not just a videogame, more a broader form of entertainment in that sense. I believe that *Pokémon* is a form of entertainment that can bring happiness to people all over the world."

AND IT HAS proven itself to be just that, transcending media and generations and bringing together players of all ages in the pursuit of a complete Pokédex. But, predictably, such success will always spawn sequels and in a game like *Pokémon* there's only one way to make your next game even more appealing – add a bunch of new monsters. For the first proper follow-ups, *Gold* and *Silver*, Game Freak would add 100 new monsters and a host of new moves, trainers and options. Sugimori explains the thinking behind why that number wasn't any higher and why the tradition continues in the same way to this day. "The reason why there are about 100 Pokémon added per game is not that we can't come up with the ideas, especially when we have new staff – everyone can come up with unique ideas. The number is set by the duration of the project. Plus, if you added like 300 or so new monsters, that'd just be too many – we have to think of the balance of battles."

That's something that permeates almost every single aspect of the game's design, and *Gold* and *Silver* were unique in that they were the only *Pokémon* games since the originals to introduce a new type or, more specifically, two. Dark and Steel types were a huge deal when they came into play, offering a solid counter to the powerful Psychic types that ruled the game and a new all-out defensive type respectively, with excellent monsters like Skarmory and Tyranitar emerging due to this duo of new types. It also meant going back to existing monsters and updating them with the relevant typing – Magnemite and Magneton took on the Steel type, for instance – but there's a much bigger issue caused by how these types affected the mechanics and balance of battle. "By adding even one more type, it definitely makes the gameplay more complicated," Sugimori explains. "So when we did that we had to really look into the battle balance – with new moves, there's an almost infinite combination. If we can solve that problem, we can always add more types – it's not impossible."

THERE'S AN ALMOST INFINITE COMBINATION… WE CAN ALWAYS ADD MORE TYPES

Ah, battles. While being able to collect a load of monsters is a big part of the game's long term appeal, there's a whole other subculture of trainers who live for the thrill of the fight, and it's this that spawned the *Pokémon Stadium* games for N64. By bundling the games with a special cart adapter, players were able to see their simple sprite-based friends catapulted into 3D for the first time – the game even took the liberty of offering mild colour deviations for giving your monsters interesting nicknames. Capturing both the spirit of competitive battling and the connectivity side of the game, *Stadium* was a perfect companion piece for any budding trainer, not least due to the fact that it also offered the ability to play the Game Boy games on the large screen (and at an increased rate, as an unlockable to help speed up the leveling process).

While many haven't been quite so useful or ingenious, the Pokémon universe has been continually fleshed out by such spin-off titles, and both Masuda and Sugimori stress the importance of growing the brand in this way. "Rather than support the 'main' games, we see them as supporting the brand," says Sugimori. "You get to see the Pokémon from completely different angles – in a spin-off game we can expand the *Pokémon* world a little more." It also sounds like Game Freak isn't quite so protective over its creations as a lot of other studios, external developers seemingly offered a degree of freedom as the parent company sits back and enjoys seeing its characters painted in a different light. "We give some advice to the developers. One thing we always emphasise is that it may not always make sense to do the same things we do in the core series," Masuda concurs. "There aren't so many strict dos and don'ts - we'd just rather see those games do something a bit different."

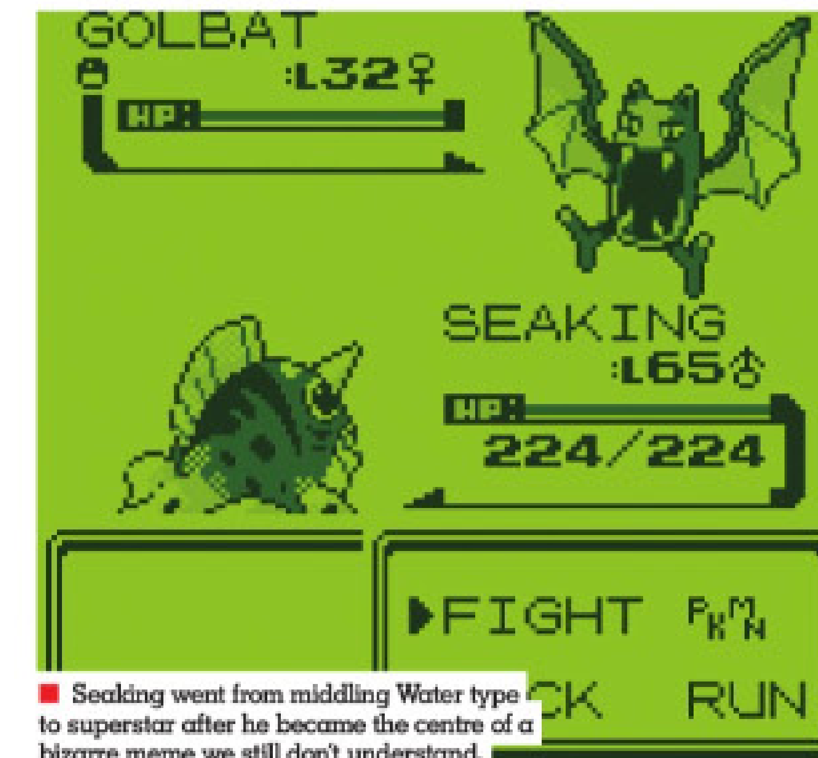
BUT WHILE PEOPLE like to see their favourite monsters engaged in activities other than just battling, what is it about the series as a whole that keeps players coming back for more? Sugimori steps up to field this one. "At its simplest, it boils down to the fact that it's easy to understand and it has incredible diversity. The characters used today in the TV show or in the movies are based on the ones we create for the games and through its features, its abilities and its shape, you can quite easily get an idea of what kind of Pokémon it is. There's a great mix of cool and cute monsters, making it easy for the audience to pick their own favourite." It's arguably this mix of monsters that see the games appeal to so varied an age group, young players instantly CONTINUED >.

Of Cards And 'Zards

PERFECTLY TIMED and tapping into the same 'you *must* get them all' spirit as the games, the *Pokémon* Trading Card Game proved phenomenally successful, and when the Base set hit, playgrounds the world over became unsafe places to be if you owned a Charizard and were foolish enough to take it to school. Most schools swiftly banned the cards after stories of violence and thefts made it to the sensationalist, headline-hungry press and, while you're less likely to be mugged for your rare cards today, the game is perhaps bigger business than ever before. While back in the day the *Pokémon* TCG was more about collecting than playing, the balance has definitely shifted as the years have gone on. Today, the TCG is a far more mature and complex affair than it once was, cunning strategies available to those that spot the synergy between certain cards. The TCG is now up to its 47th set (with the 48th due next month, the last before we get the *Black* and *White* cards) though only the most recent 11 are currently tournament legal – old sets are rotated out on a yearly basis to keep the game fresh and exciting. It's a genuinely brilliant little card game for players of all ages – we still play today – and if you love the characters and the strategy of battle, or just want to try something a little different (and more accessible than the likes of *Magic The Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*), we urge you to shelf your prejudice and give it a go.



The Game Boy Color wasn't needed to play *Gold* and *Silver*, though the games were optimised for the colour handheld.



Seaking went from middling Water type to superstar after he became the centre of a bizarre meme we still don't understand.

POKÉMON: A Brief History



1996

POKÉMON RED and Green versions are released in Japan and the franchise is born.

1997

AN EPISODE of the *Pokémon* anime, 'Dennō Senshi Porygon', airs in Japan and nearly 700 viewers are hospitalised after a particularly trippy sequence triggers epileptic seizures.

1999

AFTER A three-year gap, *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* versions hit European shelves in the Game Boy's twilight. *Pokémon Snap*, arguably the best spin-off of the lot, lands for N64 the same year. The TCG also arrives and, following uproar from religious groups about its immoral nature, a rival card game called *Christian Power Cards* is released – scoring the attributes of Biblical figures is somehow considered less blasphemous than monsters.

2000

POKÉMON YELLOW, a special third edition of the first gen games based on the anime, allows players to have Pikachu follow them around. A Game Boy Color adaptation of the TCG is also released, and we're still calling out for a sequel. Meanwhile, American gamers get to talk to Pikachu in the rather poor *Hey You, Pikachu!* and we amuse ourselves with the criminally underrated *Pokémon Pinball*.



2001

POKÉMON GOLD and *Silver* versions make it to Europe some 18 months after the Japanese launch. Back East, the e-Reader is released and new *Pokémon* TCG sets are rolled out with readable strips down one side, unlocking mini-games, art and info when scanned.

2002

NINTENDO'S FRANCHISE spawns its own console in the Pokémon Mini. It remains the smallest console to sport interchangeable carts ever produced, and a staggering ten games were made for it.



2003

POKÉMON RUBY and *Sapphire* propel the franchise onto Game Boy Advance. An updated version of *Pokémon Pinball* joins it later, the new monsters making the already addictive gameplay even more life-consuming. Japan gets *Pokémon Colosseum*, a *Stadium* follow-up which sadly omits the mini-games, probably our favourite part.

2005

NINTENDO DS goes on sale in the UK, the first and only console to launch with a *Pokémon* game. Unfortunately, it's *Pokémon Dash*. On the other side of the world, a *Pokémon* theme park opens in Nagoya. We stay home and play the Adventure mode in GameCube title *Pokémon XD: Gale Of Darkness* instead, the closest thing so far to a 'proper' home version.



2007

POKÉMON DIAMOND and *Pearl* arrive, utilising the wireless functionality of the DS.







■ Status effects have always been an important part of battle strategy, disruption proving as useful as damage.

identifying with simple, colourful monsters like Pikachu, while older gamers have badass Dragons and oddities to keep them entertained.

While surrounding the games with cartoons, comics and assorted fluffy tat might have given the impression that *Pokémon* was a game purely for children, the truth couldn't be further away. While the basics can be picked up by players of more or less any age, the series offers more tactical depth than any other traditional RPG you might care to mention, and, with a little research, you'll uncover a staggering amount of under-the-hood cleverness that will fly straight over the heads of many. The secrets of EV training, the formulae that determine everything from stat growth to breeding mechanics, the ability to build teams based on countering common threats and dealing with any scenario rather than just putting together six theoretically strong monsters… there's so much to the game that the youngest end of the audience simply wouldn't understand that *Pokémon*'s faux simplicity is perhaps its most ingenious trait. "Generally, people think that *Pokémon* is a game for children but I believe that's a misunderstanding," says Sugimori, though as we've just addressed, it's not an unfair assessment of the game at face value – it's just a failure to look beyond the cutesy characters and the fact that the box recommends a basic level of reading to see the undeniable complexity that lies beneath.

There's another reason why *Pokémon* is now able to reach out to a far broader audience, too. Those that grew up loving the franchise will now be at least in their twenties, now far better able to extol the hidden virtues of what are evidently great games eloquently.



PEOPLE THINK THAT POKÉMON IS A GAME FOR CHILDREN – THAT'S A MISUNDERSTANDING

And as gaming continues to grow more and more mainstream, and a handheld is no longer a geeky thing to pull out of your bag on a bus or train, anyone can put in a little training at the first sign of downtime without fear of getting dodgy looks from others. We'd also argue that a lot of the negative stigma attached to the franchise has gone, swept away when Pikachu alarm clocks and Bulbasaur slippers got moved up into the attic en masse, never to be seen again.

■■■ SO WHILE YOU might not be able to walk into a supermarket and buy spaghetti in the shape of Pikachu any more, don't let it fool you into thinking that the many arms of the *Pokémon* machine have been severed. No, the card game charges ever onwards (actually growing in popularity in recent years), Japan continues to churn out movies at the rate of one a year, and even the merchandise is still around, even if it has been scaled back since its rather ridiculous heyday. It's a more structured, streamlined operation than the merch splurge of the late Nineties, and with good reason – *Pokémon* hit saturation point in record time and those that weren't obsessed with it after the first few days quickly grew tired of not being able to move for Pikachu. Today, you have to admire the way the business is run, and, with a dedicated team on the case in the form of The Pokémon Company, each division of the brand is another cog in a machine that runs like clockwork.

"Everything is based on the on-sale dates of the videogames and depending on that, The Pokémon Company will put together a plan as to how to use the different characters," Masuda explains. "There'll be new characters for the TV show and for the TCG too. The challenge there is that you can't change the on-sale date of the games, so this kind of cross-promotion is difficult." But Sugimori explains that, by having the various divisions work together, the challenge becomes worth the extra hassle. "As we develop the game, we get the TV, TCG and animation teams in to play it so that they have a better idea of what the world, the characters and the Pokémon are like," he tells us. "We're all creating the characters and the settings together so that they're consistent across movies, games and trading cards."

Ultimately, though, it all comes back to the games. They're the reason we love all things *Pokémon* and, while it might be the anime interpretation of Jigglypuff (singing people to sleep before drawing on their faces like a drunken teenager) that makes us look especially hard for him in-game, or the memory of finally pulling a Base set Charizard card that sees him pip other Fire types to a spot in our team, everything feeds back into the games. And as each generation of monsters brings with it new play mechanics that force even the brightest trainers to rethink strategies, this is one monster that shows absolutely no sign of being hunted to extinction just yet.

My First Pokémon

EVERYBODY REMEMBERS THEIR FIRST, RIGHT? CHOOSING YOUR STARTING COMPANION IS AMONG THE MOST EXCITING DECISION POKÉMON OFFERS UP, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'LL EVOLVE INTO OR WHEN, LET ALONE HOW USEFUL THEY ARE. WHICH DID YOU PICK?

BULBASAUR



■ There's our boy, the odd quadruped shrubbery with a funny voice. Those that side with the only split-type starter (its Grass and Poison combination a mixed blessing) will find life incredibly easy as the game begins, any Grass move ripping through the opening two Gym Leaders' Pokémon. There's also the benefit of Bulbasaur evolving at a quicker rate than the other two, making him the better choice for impatient players too.

CHARMANDER



■ The fiery little lizard proved to be among the most popular choices (if only since it would eventually become Ultimate Badass Charizard); odd considering that the Fire type actually makes for the hardest opening – both Brock and Misty's squad have moves that will snuff out Charmander (and even his evolved form), meaning you'll have to catch some backup monsters if you want to succeed.

SQUIRTLE



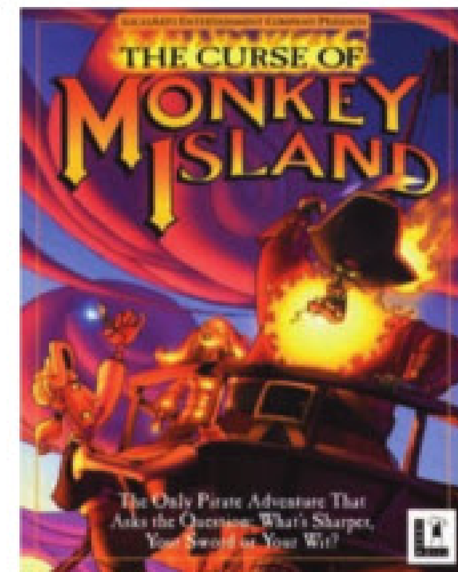
■ With no option to slap a pair of shades on Squirtle to have him mimic the anime's clearly amazing Squirtle Squad, there's basically no point to choosing him. Well, that's not entirely fair – Water monsters are in short supply until you get the better fishing rods, plus Blastoise is a decent defensive bet. His opening falls somewhere between the other two in terms of challenge, though later on Surge and Erika won't treat the poor little shelled fellow well.



BEHIND THE SCENES

THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

Though it started life without any of the original Monkey Island creators, Guybrush Threepwood's third adventure has since captured the heart of LucasArts fandom as one of the greatest point-and-click games ever made. Writer/designer Larry Ahern explains how it all came to be…



Released: 1997
Format: PC
Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: In-house

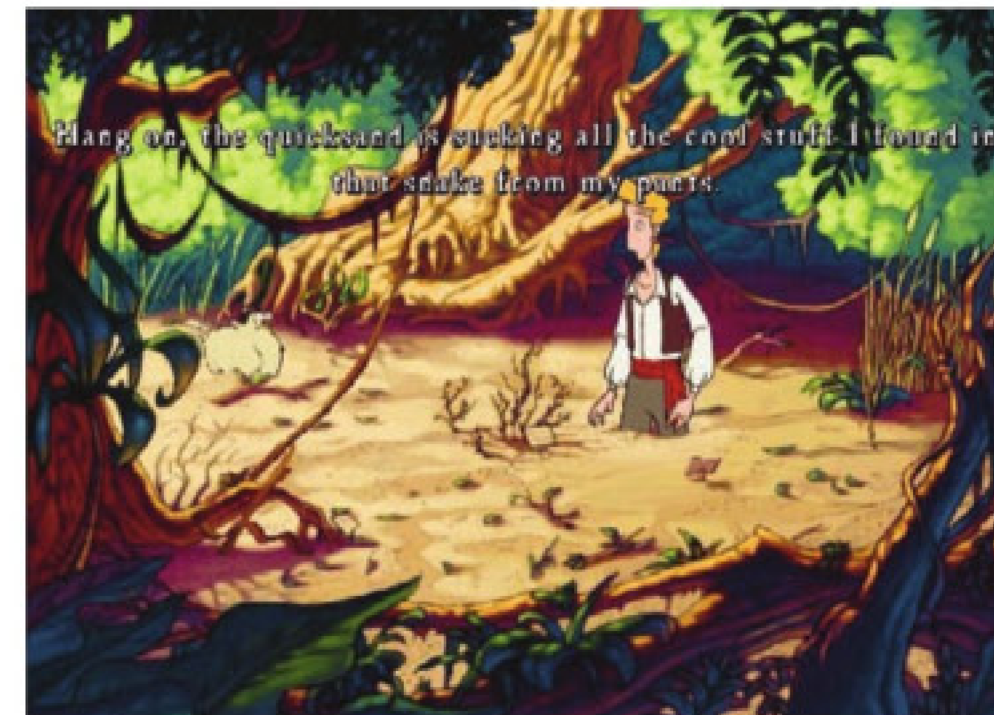
KEY STAFF:
Larry Ahern
Writer/Designer
Jonathan Ackley
Writer/Designer
Bill Tiller
Lead Animator
Michael Land
Composer

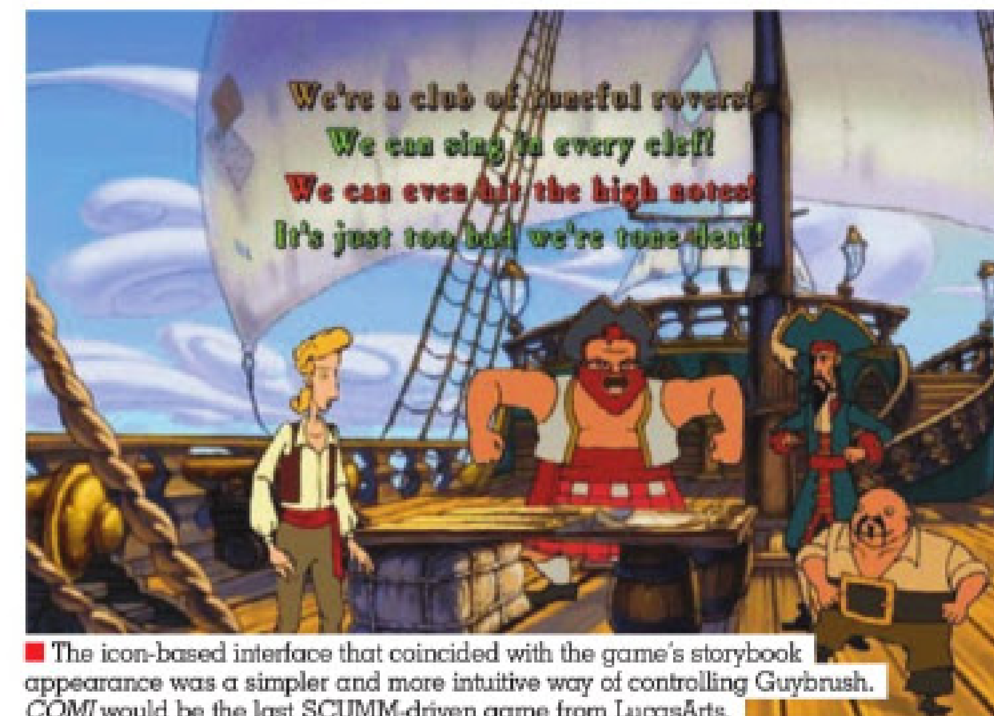
YOU CAN JUST imagine the scene. Ron Gilbert creates one of LucasArts' most valued adventure franchises in *Monkey Island*, and, at the end of the second game, leaves the company, with a new team left to step in and pick up the pieces and create the next title.

It's a situation that would throw most people into a panic, but Larry Ahern and Jonathan Ackley took on the challenge with gusto. "Well, I guess it was a big responsibility taking on such a beloved license, but mostly it was just a lot of fun," recalls Ahern. "It was like coming home one day and finding a note from your parents saying, 'On vacation. Not sure when we'll be back. Big pile of cash in the drawer and a Ferrari in the garage. Don't crash it.' But, then, it was also a little bit like that exquisite corpse game, where someone writes the beginning of a story, then passes it on to someone else to finish, without giving them any idea of where it was going. And, then mix in a little bit of the telephone game."

Of course, the biggest challenge the new team faced with Gilbert's departure was how to continue the storyline. The ending of *Monkey Island 2* was incredibly cryptic, and opened up a whole set of questions that would need to be addressed in some way before the third game could ever get started. This played a huge part in how *Curse*'s story was developed, and was not without its problems. "The critical challenge with the beginning of CONTINUED >.

WE RIPPED OFF THE GAME SIMON, BUT WITH A COMPUTER, A BANJO AND A PIRATE





The icon-based interface that coincided with the game's storybook appearance was a simpler and more intuitive way of controlling Guybrush. *COMI* would be the last SCUMM-driven game from LucasArts.







Whoever could have imagined that one diamond ring could cause so many problems?

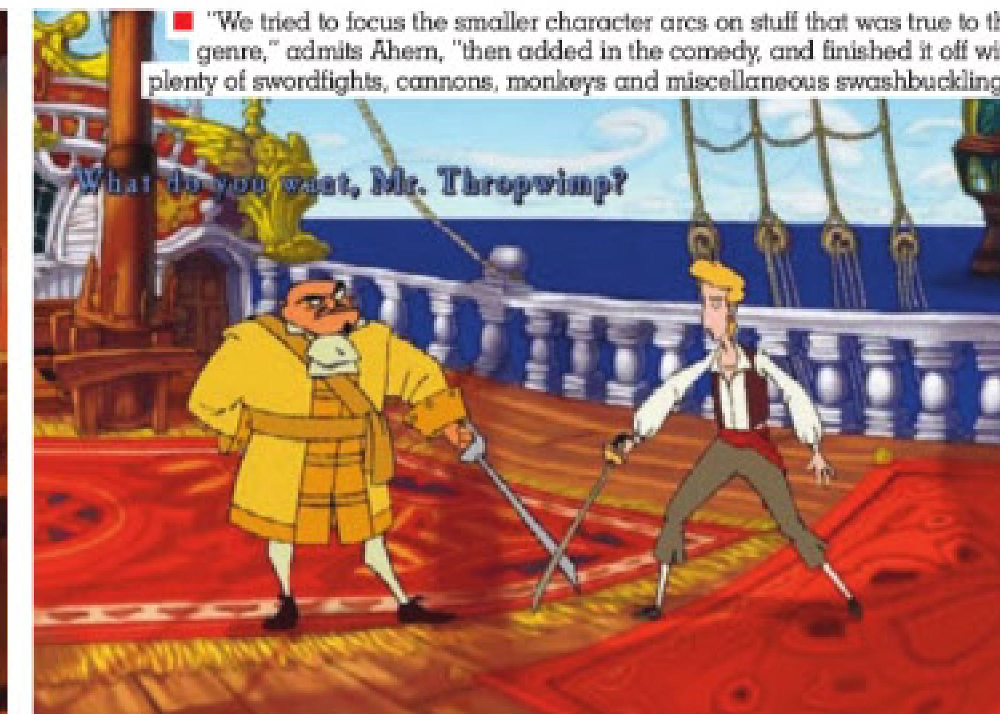












"We tried to focus the smaller character arcs on stuff that was true to the genre," admits Ahern, "then added in the comedy, and finished it off with plenty of swordfights, cannons, monkeys and miscellaneous swashbuckling."



FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
BILGERAT
This was the first proper game I got for the PC and it is still the oldest PC game that I play regularly. It is the best *Monkey Island* game, in my opinion, and the graphics and voice work are still good enough to hold up today. Some of the puzzles are just genius. Pouring oil on a guy so you can peel the map off his back? Stopping a song by introducing a line that doesn't rhyme? Replacing a painting's face with your own to create a family resemblance? Brilliant.

Posted by:
GRIZZLY
I have many memories of this one – I can still remember most of the singing pirates' lines, and the banjo duel was absolutely brilliant!

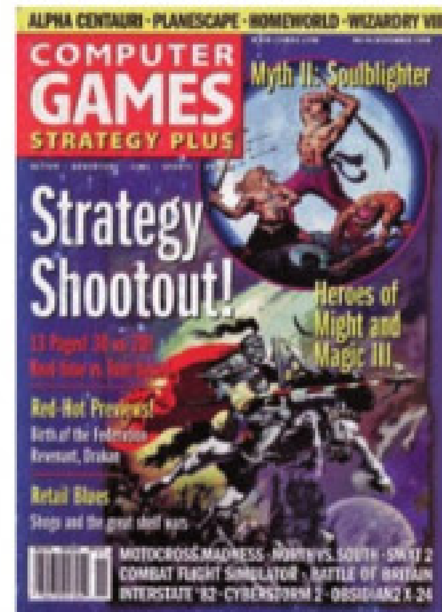
Posted by:
DELBOY84
Despite Ron Gilbert moving on since *LeChuck's Revenge*, the new art style, combined with top voice acting and ,of course, Murray, made it an excellent entry into a well-loved series.

Posted by:
WODIN_UK
An outstanding game, probably the second best in the series for me (in Mega Monkey mode, of course). As one of the first PC games I played, I loved the sharp dialogue, visual style and one of the best point-and-click systems I've used. And the funky piece of eight thing. A classic, which needs a DS re-release.

Posted by:
COYOTE SMITH
After the ending to the second game, it felt like there didn't really need to be a third one. Saying that, *Curse* was a worthy sequel.



WHAT THEY SAID…



Even Ron Gilbert, (heck, especially Ron Gilbert) should be proud. This is an absolute must for all adventure gamers. Other than being a bit wordy at times, the only other criticism one can level is that it is probably a tad too short, leaving us wanting more

Computer Games Magazine, 1997

Curse was, in our opinion, to dispatch with the crazy carnival elements as fast as possible, so we could get the player back into a pirate game. Spending time at Big Whoop at the start of the sequel just seemed like a really bad idea. Now, who knows… maybe Ron had something brilliant in mind for this, and it would have worked out great. But, unfortunately, he wasn't with the company any more," explains Ahern. "Originally, we had this whole storyline based around LeChuck marrying Elaine. You got to crash their reception, and you had to hunt down all the pirate guests and return the wedding gifts to break a curse. We also had a longer section at the beginning with Wally at LeChuck's fortress, and you played croquet with skulls and had to get him to pop his head up through a hole in the ground so you could whack him with the mallet. I think the reason was to knock some sense into him, because Wally had been brainwashed by LeChuck into being evil. But, we all know the real reason was because hitting him with a mallet would be funny. Then at some point we came to our senses and realized we couldn't make a game about a wedding. And we also realized we had to explain all that confusing stuff from the end of *Monkey 2*. So we hunkered down, simplified the wedding idea to just a cursed ring, and made a long list of piratey things we wanted to do in the game."



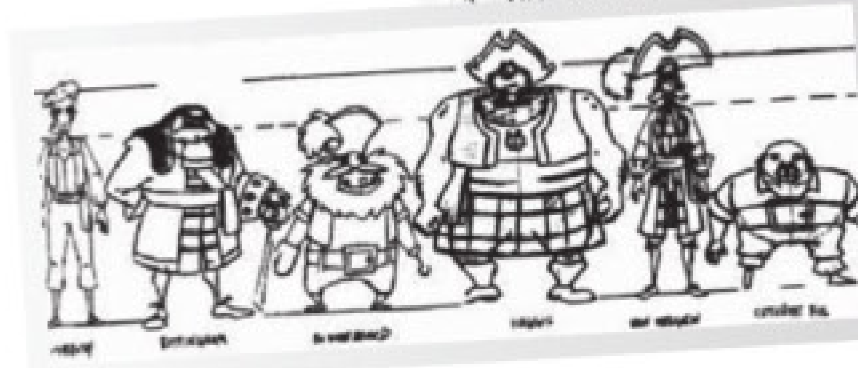
LARRY AHERN
Writer/Designer

THE OPENING, which sees Guybrush initially stranded on a fairground car stuck in the ocean before the arrival of LeChuck, boasts a stunning storybook feel, with 2D animation bringing the characters and locations to life. It's a visual style that is carried through the rest of the adventure, crammed with fine detail and giving each location its own distinct personality. When the game was released, the visuals were cutting edge – even today, they don't fail to impress. Bill Tiller was responsible for creating this visual tour-de-force in conjunction with Ahern's vision for the game. "Bill really wanted to work on a *Monkey Island* game, so he pushed for it pretty hard from the start," says Ahern. "I was a little sceptical at first. He'd just come off *The Dig*, where he painted some beautiful rocks, and some gorgeous cliffs, and then some other really nice rocks. I had something more complex and colourful in mind for *Curse*. But he jumped in and proved that he was more than up to the task.

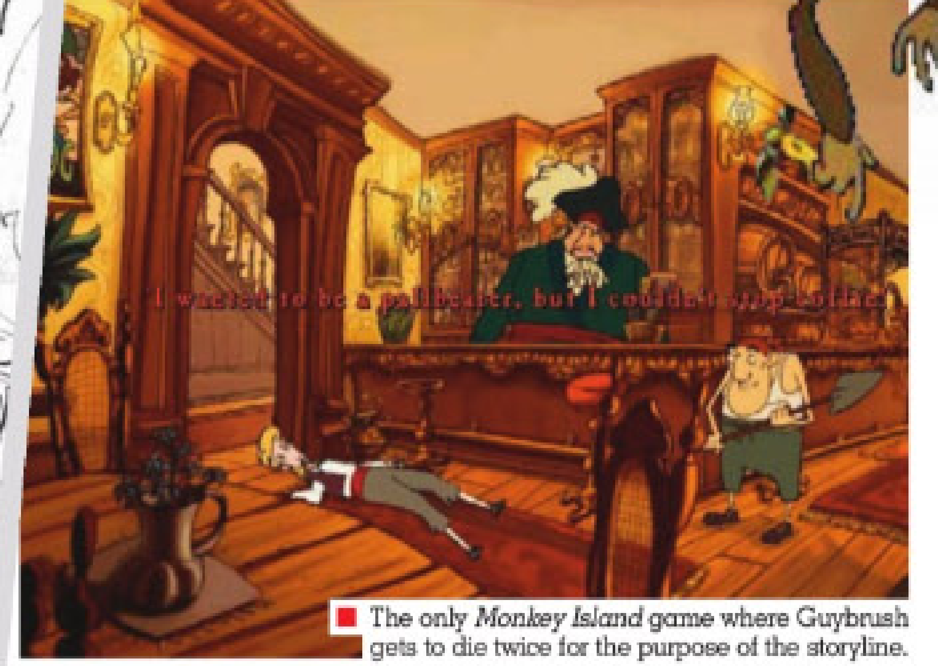
"We spent a lot of time during pre-production trying to nail down a look for the game. I also wanted a signature element that would give the world an interesting style, so we developed the curly cloud motif. Bill tried a lot of approaches with the rendering style to get that storybook feel, and I definitely shoved him out of his comfort zone, but, once it clicked, we were glad we'd taken the extra time to do that. Then I did basic thumbnail drawings of locations to communicate where I saw the different puzzle and story elements fitting into the scenes but gave Bill free rein to rearrange them to fit the game design. Once he had the look down, he knew exactly how to execute it, and was great at coming up with creative visual solutions to a lot of problems."



The distinct art style of the *Curse Of Monkey Island* world means it has held up better than its predecessors.



"I got some especially nice character design work from Derek Sakai and Kevin Micallef on Guybrush and LeChuck, respectively," says Larry Ahern.

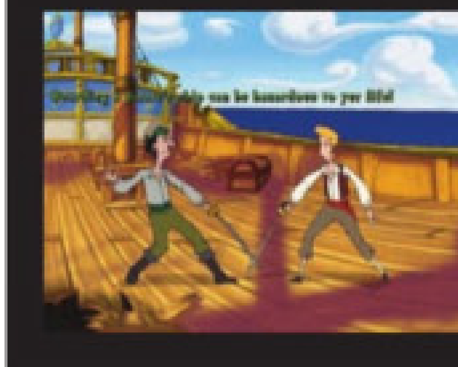


The only *Monkey Island* game where Guybrush gets to die twice for the purpose of the storyline.



YOU FIGHT LIKE A DAIRY FARMER

WITH SWORDFIGHTING SUCH an integral part of the first *Monkey Island*, it seemed a natural fit for a starring role in *Curse Of Monkey Island*. This time around, however, rather than just insult your way around the Caribbean, rhyming your responses would be the key to victory. "Plan B was to take the original, add a slight variation to it (rhyming) that hopefully put a new twist on the humor, and then just try not to screw it up. We figured it was an old favourite, and players would want to revisit it. The 'new and unique' idea that we were working on was actually our interactive musical sequences, but we had a hard time fleshing that idea out into more than the one-off gag that became the pirate song."



While many favourite characters made a return, such as the Voodoo Lady, Elaine, Wally and Stan, plenty of new ones were created, including the 'Barbery Coast' hairdressing pirates, Mr Fossey, and the arrogant pirate Captain Rottingham. The best of them all, however, was a certain talking skull. "Murray started with a concept sketch I did of the exterior view of Wally's cannon. Since you were blowing up LeChuck's skeleton crew in this scene, I thought it would be fun to put pieces of one of them in the shot. Of course, once we had him in there, we had to let you talk to him. Our first stab at Murray was a bit dark, and I worried that players wouldn't enjoy the character. But, after reminding ourselves that Murray was just a head, we hit on the idea of him constantly dreaming up these grand demonic plans that he could never hope to accomplish.

"Once that clicked, Jonathan [Ackley] went to town writing the character, and everyone loved him so much that Chuck [Jordan] and Chris Purvis took every skull in the game and made it into Murray. Then we started adding Murray in anywhere else we could think of. He was the most fun to write for, with the added bonus that his animation was dirt simple."

One of the more difficult aspects of tackling a third *Monkey Island* came down to the advance of technology, and that each character now required a voice. With fans already imagining the sound of Guybrush and LeChuck in their heads for years while playing the first two adventures, there was plenty of scope to get the casting wrong. Thankfully, the team was thorough and assembled a terrific selection of actors. "We worked with LucasArts' great voice department, and Darragh O'Farrell to cast the parts," outlines Ahern. "We just gave him character designs, descriptions, sample dialogue, and a briefcase of unmarked twenties, and he pulled together the audition tapes. Then he waded through a bunch of them and pulled the best for us to review, and we picked our favourites from there. I think a few of them were brought in to do more specific readings from the scripts, just so we could be sure. It was a lot of fun.

THE GOAL WAS TO HAVE ALL SOLUTIONS ADVANCE THE PLOT AT LEAST A LITTLE BIT

"*CURSE* WAS really the first project where I got to go into the studio to work with the voice actors. Jonathan and I went down to LA for the demo recording session, which featured all the main characters. That way we were able to share our critical insights for a half hour, eat free snacks, then fly back to Marin, leaving Darragh the simple task of recording the remaining thousands of script pages. In the end, the voices were good. Dominic Armato deserves a lot of the credit, since he really pulled the thing together when he turned out to be such a great Guybrush."

Larry Ahern's journeys into the world of voice acting meant that he also had the opportunity to rub shoulders with the odd celebrity. "Well, I hate to blow my own horn about this kind of thing, because I usually let my people do that for me, but I did meet Flea when I was there. And CONTINUED >.





The cursed wedding ring was the result of revising the original concept for the game, which revolved around Elaine's wedding to LeChuck.

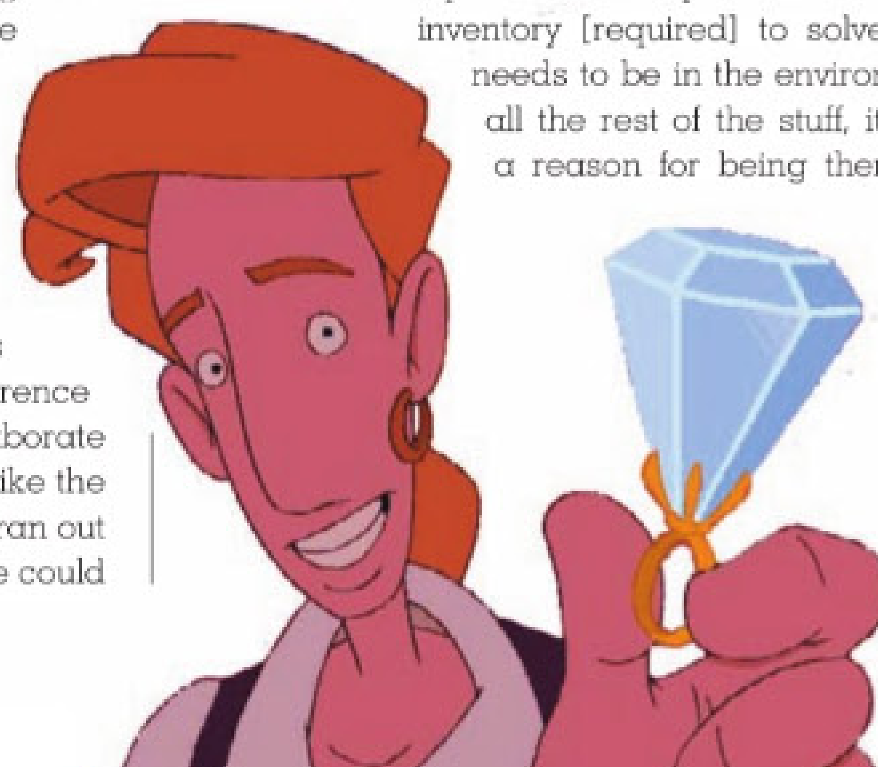


by 'meet' I mean I asked him to move his car, because it was blocking mine and we had to get to the airport. If we didn't have to get to the airport, I'm pretty sure he would have invited us to a cool Hollywood party. As a consolation for not going to Flea's party, we had lunch at The Ranch with Gary Coleman."

Of course, visual style and finesse wouldn't count for much if the puzzles suffered but, thankfully, these were cleverly thought out throughout the adventure's duration. Who could ever forget the quest for a gold tooth, a map tattooed on a sunbather's back or the ability to have Guybrush tarred and feathered, amusing asides like rhyming swordfights, interactive songs and banjo-duelling minigames? "We went into the future, played *Guitar Hero*, then went back to 1996 and changed it to a banjo, just in case there were any time-travelling lawyers around. Or maybe we ripped off the game *Simon*, but with a computer, a banjo, and a pirate."

The puzzle-creation process turned out to be very simple. "We got a lot of sugary snacks and coffee, then locked ourselves in a conference room with a big whiteboard and made lots of elaborate flow charts and diagrams of unrelated things like the weather or our plans for the weekend, until we ran out of coffee, or came up with another excuse so we could leave the room and stretch our legs. This could go on for days, until finally one of us reached that transcendent state of high blood sugar and caffeine overload and blurted out a brilliant idea, as if possessed, then fell down writhing on the floor. Then hoo-boy, just try and stop that flood of gaming goodness.

"ONCE THAT happened enough times to sort of jump-start the process, we fell into more of a routine of trying to create puzzles out of the conflicts inherent in the story situations. The goal was to have all solutions advance the plot, or a subplot, at least a little bit. If we did it right. Or, if all else failed, then at least there had to be a good joke in there. The best puzzles were woven into the bigger story and overlapped with other elements in the environment. After a while, the whole thing started to resemble a huge crossword puzzle, in that some of the big elements go in easily, but the more you fill in the spaces, the harder it gets to overlap and connect pieces. Because all the inventory [required] to solve a puzzle needs to be in the environment with all the rest of the stuff, it all needs a reason for being there besides as a puzzle solution, and it shouldn't stick out like a sore thumb." For all the brilliant puzzles that were included, just as many were left out, although Ahern is a little non-committal on what these might have been. "There were so many we discarded, that we could probably fill another game with them. However, I'd like to think they were cut because they weren't working, so it would probably be a pretty lousy game."



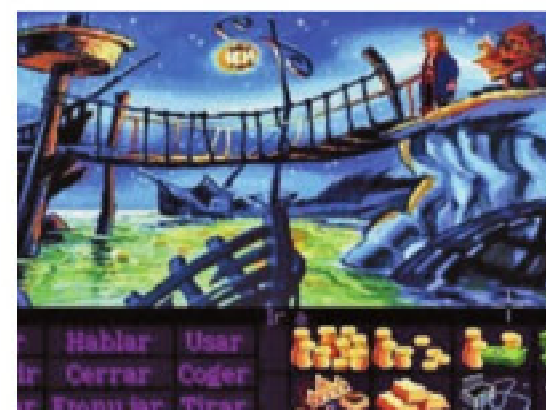
Every game has its weak points, and with *Curse Of Monkey Island* it was the last section that failed to keep up the pace. The unravelling of the storyline flowed against the pace of the adventure up to that point, and it's an area that Ahern does feel could have been handled differently. "I actually think we did a reasonable job coming up with elaborate explanations for how all the loose threads were tied together. I just don't think we implemented them so well. The challenging thing was we felt like a lot of the information needed to be there for the hardcore player, but we didn't want to bore the more casual audience. So, our solution was to include a ton of detail in an interactive dialogue with LeChuck, but to make it escapable at any time. However, from what I hear, most players slogged through all of it anyway, since exploring every nook and cranny is just what adventure gamers like to do. Given that, I think it would have been better to weave the highlights throughout the entire story, instead of giving it to players all in one big lump. Thankfully, since *Curse* was a comedy, having LeChuck deliver a ridiculously long-winded explanation of the history of *Monkey Island* could be viewed as a clever commentary on clichéd villains, so we just went that route instead."

I DID MEET FLEA WHILE I WAS IN L.A. – AND BY 'MEET' I MEAN I ASKED HIM TO MOVE HIS CAR

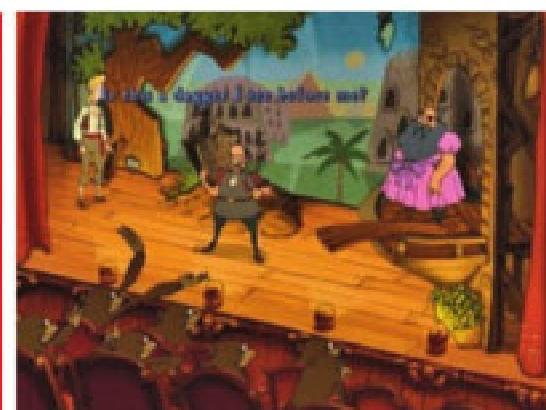
HOWEVER, THERE were other areas that didn't quite gel for Larry Ahern – the ending is a point of contention, with him commenting, "the original final cut-scene was really big, and we were out of time.

In retrospect, it probably would have been smart to ask for a short extension and some more money to do it right." On the whole, he is pleased with the results. "In the end it turned out fine, but I admit there were times I got a bit concerned, when it felt like someone was screaming incoherently at me over the phone while I rocketed down the highway with an attractive corpse in the passenger seat. Or something like that. Anyway… yeah, it was definitely a challenge. But, thankfully, Ron [Gilbert] and the fans were pretty complimentary of the results. And no one actually died."

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



The second game in the series provided much of the inspiration for Curse's story, except for the bizarre carnival twist ending.



Adventures like *Gilbert Goodmate* copy *Curse Of Monkey Island*'s style closely, but often fail to capture its sense of fun.

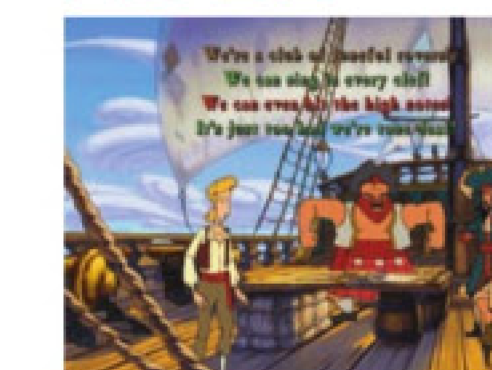




Getting yourself tarred and feathered is a small price to pay for saving the love of your life from an eternity as a gold statue.



A PIRATE I WAS MEANT TO BE



A PARTICULAR HIGHLIGHT of *Curse* is the pirate song, when the barbershop crew take a break with an interactive musical performance, and Guybrush desperately struggles to get them to work before intentionally scuppering it with the non-rhyming word 'orange'. "Jonathan [Ackley] and Chuck Jordan are the geniuses who pulled it off, along with Michael Land who composed the great music," explains Larry Ahern. "They were working on it while I was off doing something else, so I don't know how long it took. I just remember getting the voice files back and panicking because we never bothered to check if our actors could sing, which they couldn't really, and they were even off-tempo. We thought the whole thing was going to fall apart, until Michael put the music behind it and stitched it all together. And again, thankfully, it was a comedy. The other song that Jonathan and Chuck wrote, 'Plank of Love', is the biggest thing that got left out. We wanted to use this as a cheesy love theme playing over the end credits, but we just didn't have the time or budget to record it."

Hall Of Fame... Paperboy

Satchels and Spokey Dokeys at the ready, as games™ back peddles to 1984 to meet the hardest working hero in videogames

REALISM MUST ALWAYS take a backseat to entertainment in videogames. If it were imperative that videogames had to be factually accurate all of the time then *Super Mario Bros.* would be a game about fitting pressure pumps to gravity-fed shower systems, and because soldiers don't actually have the ability to miraculously heal bullet wounds by hiding behind bookshelves, games like *Modern Warfare 2* would be unbearably challenging.

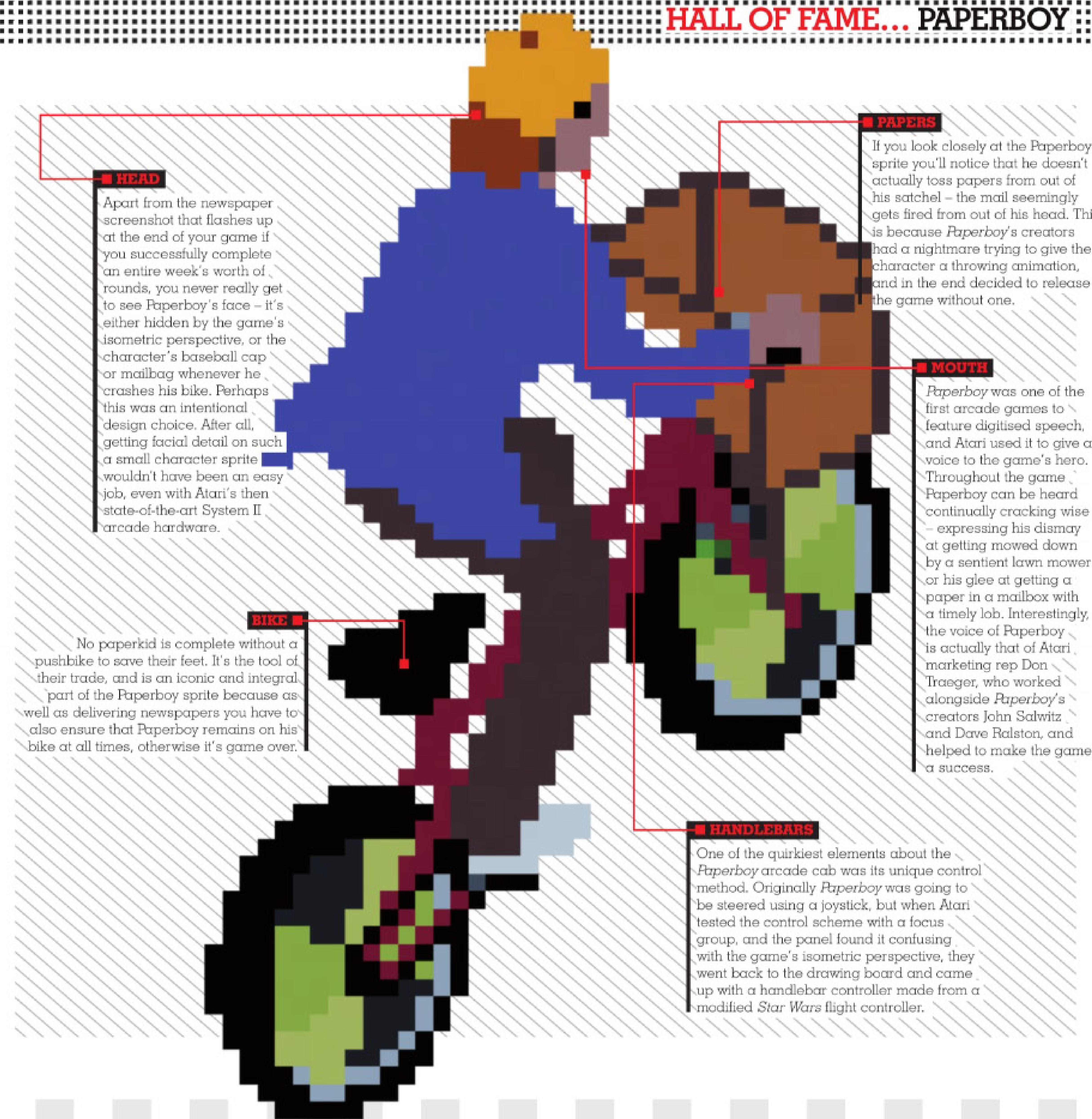
Even at the dawn of the medium though, videogame makers have been trying to bridge that gap between entertainment and realism. And the purest product of this marriage were games that tried to offer a virtual interpretation of a real-life, and often mundane, job. Throughout the years, a wide variety of occupations have been tackled by videogame makers. Some have touched on what it would be like to work as a downtrodden barman serving drinks in a pub populated by aggressive cowboys (*Tapper*), while others have tried to offer a glimpse of the cut-and-thrust world of the stockbroker (*Wall Street Kid*), allowing you to buy and sell imaginary shares and earn yourself plenty of make-believe money.

This peculiar videogame phenomenon started with one game, and ironically it was a title that attempted to impersonate the very first job that most people ever have while growing up. Released by Atari in 1984, *Paperboy* tried to replicate the daily slog by millions of kids across the planet every morning. Playing the role of a seemingly detested paperboy, your job was simply to deliver newspapers to all of your customers. But despite its somewhat dull-sounding premise, *Paperboy* cleverly added a strong kick of fun and hilarity to the banality by allowing players to cause as much damage to the property of non-subscribers as possible, and then finishing each round with a cool dirt track, complete with ramps and target boards to hone your paper-aiming on. Set over a week, *Paperboy* featured three streets of varying difficulty, and each was littered with all manner of weird human obstacles and hazards to avoid – be it aggressive mutts, kids trying to trip you up with their radio-controlled cars, two skinheads partaking in a comical street brawl, or car and motorcycle drivers with tunnel vision. With most arcade games asking players to shoot cascading waves of invading aliens, or bound from precariously positioned platforms in colourful worlds, it was *Paperboy*'s down-to-earth, easily identifiable premise that undoubtedly gave it its charm and made it a success.

While the game is unquestionably a classic, very little is known about the central character – other than his profession, obviously. During gameplay, the unnamed boy's face is always concealed, either by the game's isometric perspective, which placed the camera just behind our hero, or through his baseball cap and satchel, which slumps comically over his head whenever he crashes his bike. The only glimpse you ever get of his freckly Alfred E. Neuman-style face is a small image printed on the front page of the fictional newspaper that he delivers – which, weirdly, also acts as the game's end-of-level results screen.

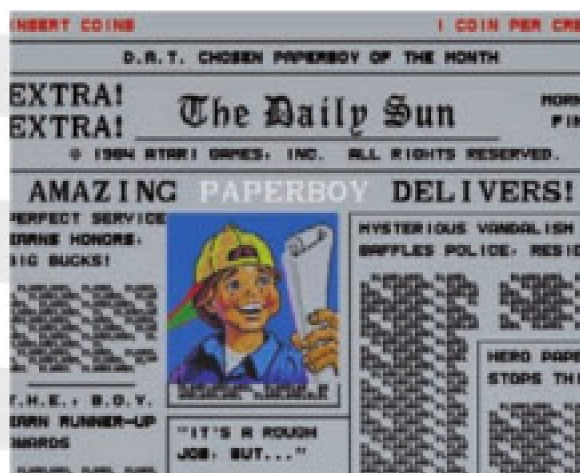
MOST OF PAPERBOY'S personality comes through his cheeky troublemaking antics and humorous digitised commentary whenever he scores a direct hit with a timely tabloid or crashes into a hazard. Whether intentional, or simply by design to make life for the programmers and artists a little simpler, being one of the first videogame heroes that kids could really emphasise with meant that Paperboy really didn't need to have a big personality to attract fans and win appeal.

It's odd to think that kids in the mid-Eighties were getting up at the crack of dawn to deliver newspapers, and then using the money they earned to pump into *Paperboy* to replay their self-same job in the virtual-world. But this brings us to an interesting point about the game. Perhaps another draw was that it gave kids the opportunity to prove and compare their paper-delivering skills with their friends. After all, the same skills are required to do the job in both worlds – you have to be capable of avoiding obstacles, be alert of your surroundings and time your newspaper lobbing to perfection. The only real difference is that in the videogame incarnation you had to pay for the privilege. But at least the game never forced you to get up at some ridiculous hour on a miserable and blustery morning to battle the elements just to deliver the daily news. Now that's a slice of realism we could happily do without.

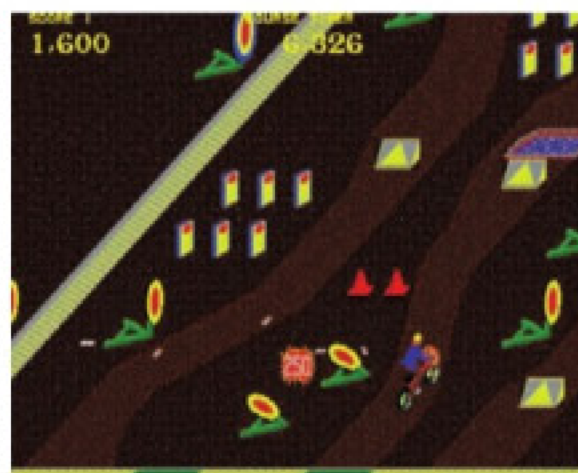


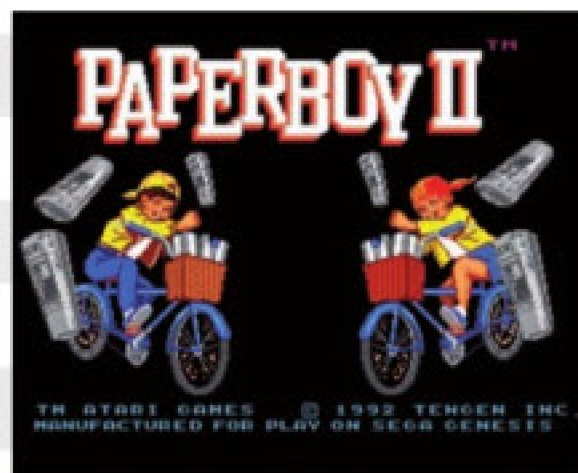
>. MAGIC MOMENTS


The *Paperboy* arcade cabinet was memorable for its unique handlebar controls.

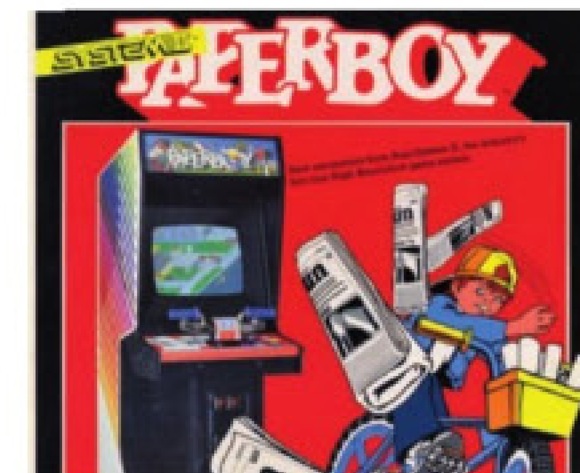


Finish a week of rounds and Paperboy makes the front page – must've been a slow news week.


After delivering newspapers in American suburbs, Paperboy gets to unwind on a dirt track.



Paperboy II saw a watershed moment for sexual equality with the introduction of Papergirl.



Paperboy was one of the first games to feature digitised speech.


The streets were full of ways to score extra brownie points with customers.


Paperboy went all 3D on the N64. Sadly, the game wasn't a patch on the original.



Paperboy finishes his round and receives a hero's welcome from fans and supporters.

INSERT COINS 1 COIN PER CREDIT

D.A.T. CHOSEN PAPERBOY OF THE MONTH

EXTRA! EXTRA! The Daily Sun MORNING FINAL

JOB SECTION

Looking to better your chances of making friends and lovers with materialistic people, or perhaps you've been toying with the idea of embarking on a new career in giant gorilla removal? Then why not leaf through the *The Daily Sun*'s job section, which is packed full of exciting job opportunities for any young virtual graduate.



BAR MANAGER REQUIRED FOR TAPPER BAR

Job Description
A very demanding saloon in Texas is currently looking to hire a tenacious and unflustered bar manager to serve drinks (mostly beer) and collect money from our four separate bar areas simultaneously.

Required Skills
As they will be expected to run four bars singlehanded, the applicant must be well organised, steady on their feet, have a minimum two years' experience in bar management, and must demonstrate good numeracy and people skills.

Benefits
As well as keeping all tips earned, the successful applicant will receive one free drink after each shift, and will also get to work in a warm friendly atmosphere (most of the time).

TRASHMAN NEEDED

Job Description
An opportunity has arisen for a hardworking individual to join our team of refuse collectors. The successful candidate will be expected to meet stringent targets, have a good sense of road safety, and be approachable and friendly to customers.

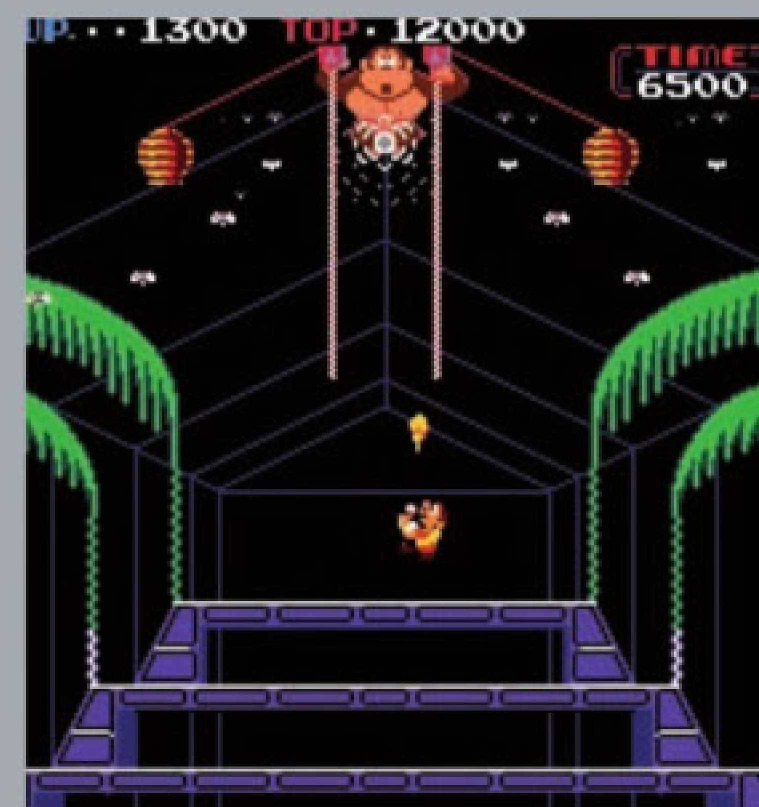
Required Skills
The perfect candidate is someone who isn't afraid to muck in and get their hands dirty (though gloves will be provided), has good people skills and acute spatial awareness.



They must also be able to work well under pressure and cope with the unique phenomena of 'colour clash'.

Benefits
You will be able to take advantage of our attractive pension scheme, and will receive first dibs on any valuable rubbish that gets left out for collection.

RENTOEXTERMINATE NOW HIRING



Job Description
A pest control company is currently looking for a brave and diligent bugman to join our newly established insect/gorilla division. Your main objective will be to combat the growing threat of vegetation destruction by nuisance insects and stubborn giant gorillas.

Required Skills
It is essential that the successful applicant can work comfortably around insects, bees and gorillas, and must also be a good shot with a tin of bug-spray. Strictly no plumbers.

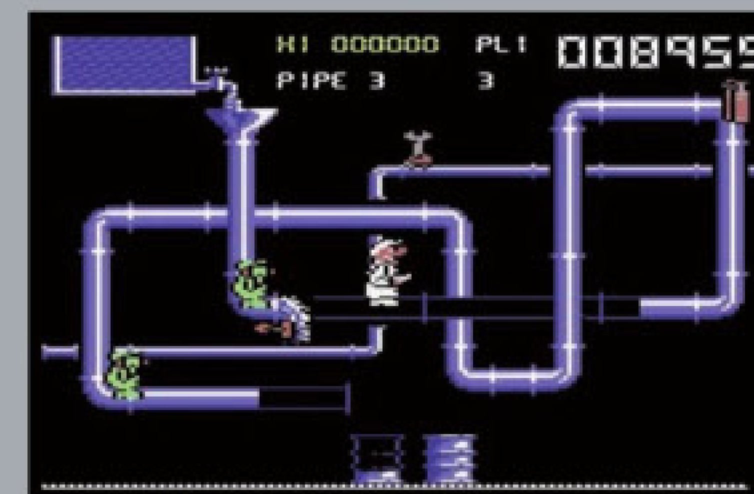
Benefits
As well as a lifetime supply of bug spray, you can also look forward to a very early retirement.

PLUMBER'S MATE NEEDED

Job Description
I am currently looking for a brave plumber's mate to assist me on a dangerous oil collection mission on a deep-sea oilrig. Your main duty will involve unblocking oil pipes to allow smooth functioning of the rig's oil extraction system.

Required Skills
I am looking for someone who has a good knowledge of welding and plumbing, and who isn't bothered by working in hot and cramped conditions. Being a dab hand at unclogging things is also desirable too.

Benefits
As well as a great remuneration package, you will also receive a company van and free life insurance.



INDUSTRIAL MIGHT AND LOGIC VACANCY

Job Description
The toy company Industrial Might And Logic is currently seeking an engineer to work the night shift and oversee the maintenance of their toy-making machine, The Beast, which produces their popular *Star Wars* action figure range.

Required Skills
IML requires an individual with a strong analytical mind, and the ability to work well



under pressure. A basic knowledge of *Star Wars* is also desirable for quality control reasons.

Benefits
Free *Star Wars* action figures and the hours of daylight all to yourself.

PARK RANGER REQUIRED

Job Description
We are currently seeking a Park Ranger to ensure the conservation of our National Park. Duties will include patrolling the lake from inside the park dinghy, keeping a lookout and rescuing any weak swimmers in trouble, and the general upkeep of the shoreline and picnic area from litterbugs.

Required Skills
We are looking for an observant individual, who hates the sight of litter, loves the great outdoors and is not afraid of water.

Benefits
A cooked meal is provided for you every shift, and lifeguard, snake handling and dingy driving training are also offered.





JOB OF THE WEEK

BURGER CHEF WANTED

Job Description
A popular fast-food chain is currently looking to hire an enthusiastic chef to run one of their busiest burger eateries. Duties will include preparing the food area ready for service, cooking beef pates and placing them inside bread buns to a Michelin Star standard.

Required Skills
As head chef you will be expected to prepare and cook the food with your feet, so ensuring great personal hygiene at all times is vital. The ideal candidate will also be physically fit and must not have any food allergies.

Benefits
As well as a competitive bonus scheme, you will also be provided with a free cooked meal during every shift.



COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to the rarest retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: MSX2
YEAR: 1989
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: In-House
EXPECT TO PAY: £150-£200



EXHIBIT A: Most MSX games have plastic cases so should stay in good condition. Keep an eye out for torn inlays, though.



EXHIBIT B: Loose cartridges are much easier to find than boxed copies, but they'll still set you back a bit.



EXHIBIT C: The original release came with a free *Space Manbow* comic in the box. Few remain intact, however.

SPACE MANBOW

Why It's Rare

LIKE MANY shoot-'em-ups, *Space Manbow* is hard to find simply for the reason that there are more people chasing it than there are copies in existence. Nobody really knows how many cartridges were actually produced by Konami, but the high prices it constantly attracts suggest that there weren't many. Even as a loose cartridge, you can expect to pay around £40. Demand is that high.

Part of the problem is that the game was only ever released in Japan, but it's a problem made worse by the age of the cartridge, as well as the fact that its host machine is relatively niche when compared to certain other games consoles. As the game was produced towards the end of the MSX's life, as Konami began to pledge increased support for Nintendo, we are almost certain that *Space Manbow* will have been granted the smallest possible production run.

Throw in the fact that *Space Manbow* was one of Konami's best shooters of the Eighties, and that, to this day, it has never been properly converted to any other format, and it's easy to see why it remains a favourite among MSX collectors.

FACT!

Want a small taste of *Space Manbow* without the expense? Plug both the DS and GBA versions of *Goemon* into a DS and it'll unlock a playable version of *Space Manbow's* opening stage.



Worth Playing?

If you can find a copy, and if you can afford it, then yes, *Space Manbow* is definitely one that's best removed from the shrink-wrap. Playing in the same vein as *Gradius*, this underrated Konami shooter is a horizontal affair that's easily among the publisher's best work. Few people will see beyond the second stage without cheating, as the difficulty is so high, but even then the experience is one that any shoot-'em-up fan will adore.

The first level alone should be considered a defining moment for the genre. Taking its cue from the third stage/boss in *R-Type*, the entire level is one huge enemy: an armoured ground vehicle, multiple screens in length, which carries several sub-enemies upon itself. Making your way above and through the hulking mass of machinery is both challenging and awe inspiring. So even if you never manage to beat the the first boss, you'll always have the pleasure of replaying that awesome first stage.

Still, the ridiculously high price of an original *Space Manbow* cart is definitely too high if you're only interested in playing, rather than collecting. The sooner Konami realises this, and includes *Space Manbow* in a new retro compilation, the better.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Robert Vroemisse**
Occupation: **Graphic Designer**

Why collect MSX games and what drew you to Space Manbow in particular?
Why? Because I like these retro games a lot. I have had an MSX since I was a little boy, so nostalgia is also a big part of the fun. And why *Space Manbow*? Because it's one of those must-have games that every system has. It's great in every aspect.

Please tell us how/where you found the game.
I bought the game at an MSX fair in Tilburg, Holland, in 2002. There was a big MSX auction and *Space Manbow* was one of the items that was up for the bidding.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
The game was (and still is) in near mint condition. Just a little wear at the top and bottom of the box. Very common with Japanese boxes. The cartridge is in mint condition and so is the manual. It even has the original registration card and some flyers for other Konami games. I bought the game for 175 guilders. Which is about £70.

Do you actually play Space Manbow, and if so, what do you think of it?
I have played and finished *Space Manbow* very often in the past. The quality of the game is very high. Great music, superb graphics and the gameplay is very well balanced. It's hard, but never too hard. The game uses some techniques that are not often seen in MSX games: smooth, multilayer and multidirectional scrolling, for example.

Finally, would you ever consider selling Space Manbow or is it yours for life?
It's mine for life. No doubt about that.

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner then email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk




BEHIND THE SCENES

DIDDY KONG RACING

Appearing as if from out of nowhere in 1997, Diddy Kong Racing saved N64's second Christmas and beat Nintendo at its own game. Now, 14 years on, Rare speaks out about the making of its classic racer





Released: 21 November 1997
Format: Nintendo 64
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Rare

KEY STAFF:
Design
Lee Schuneman
Martin Wakeley
Software
Rob Harrison
Paul Mountain
John Pegg
Richard Gale
Art
Kevin Bayliss
Lee Musgrave
(Rare's Head of Art)
Keith Rabbette
Dean Smith
Johnni Christensen
Bryan Smyth
Paul Cunningham
Audio
Dave Wise
Graeme Norgate

DIDDY KONG RACING was destined to be a hit. It combined the gameplay of both *Super Mario 64* and *Mario Kart 64*, added a cast of likeable characters, and was released as a special N64 surprise in the run up to Christmas. How could anyone resist? However, given the fact that both *Mario Kart 64* and *Super Mario 64* didn't influence the production; that Nintendo, and with it Diddy Kong, was nowhere near the title until the last moment; and that it was never intended as a Christmas release until just a few months prior, you begin to realise that the game's success was far from predictable.

Diddy Kong Racing signalled the dawning of a new era for Rare and set it upon the directorial route it would take to this day. As Lee Schuneman, who was game director on *Diddy Kong Racing* and is currently Rare's head of production, explains, the initial vision for the game was far from clear. "It was a series of iterations trying different things until we got an interesting approach," he remembers.

As Schuneman recalls, "A team of four – Chris Stamper, lead engineer on the project from the start; Lee Musgrave on art; Rob Harrison on Software; and me – initially worked on a Caveman/time-travel RTS for N64, for which I did an initial design and Lee Musgrave did some art. But this didn't last long." Ultimately, the RTS game was abandoned and the team set out once more to look for an interesting idea and began to look at creating a 'fun racer' using some of the RTS assets, such as woolly mammoths, to populate the game in its early stages of development.

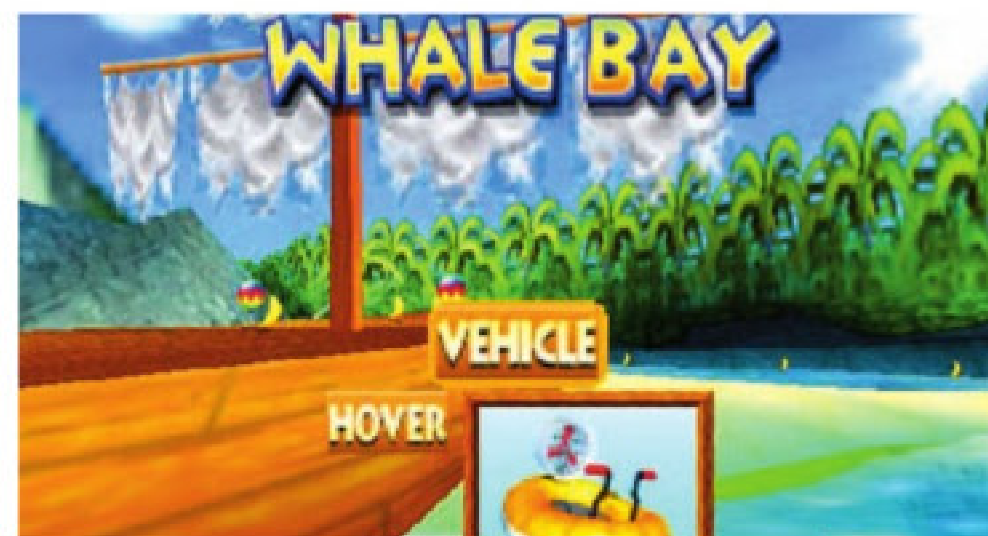
As with many gamers, the words 'fun racer' brought to Schuneman's mind a joyful memory of a certain SNES classic. "I loved *Mario Kart* on SNES. Before I got my job at Rare in April 1996 on *Donkey Kong Land 2*, I took great pleasure in racing against all my friends. We spent hours playing that game, so it obviously influenced the racing part of *Diddy* CONTINUED >.

MARIO KART ON SNES INFLUENCED THE RACING PART OF DIDDY KONG RACING





Beating the character TT in the time trial races took many an hour and saw controllers across the world being thrown against the wall.









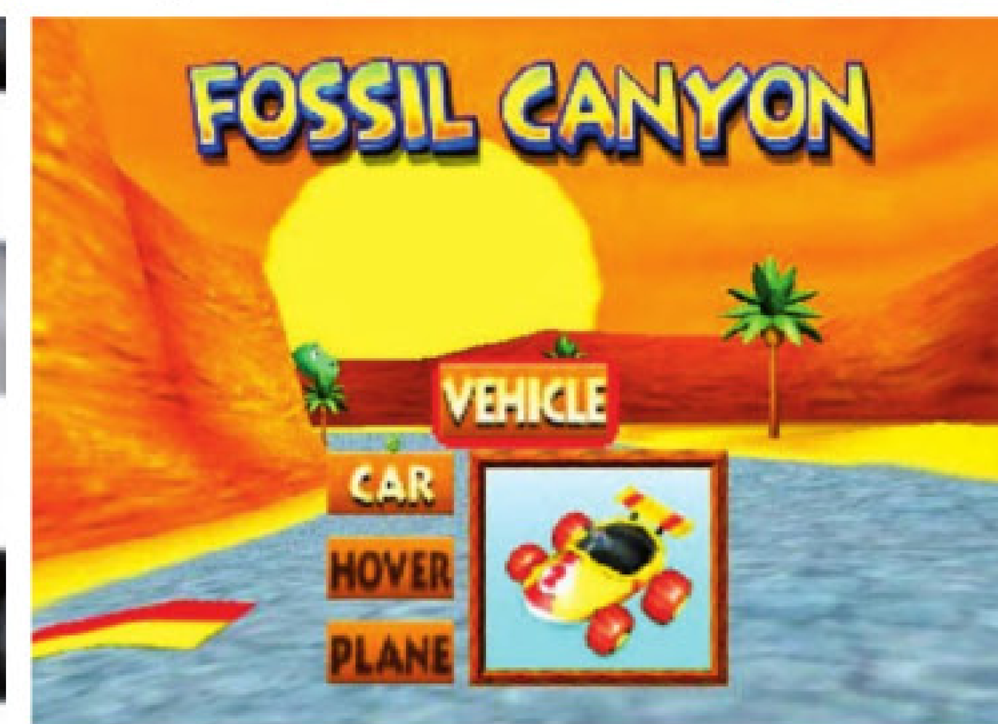








Much like its predecessor *Mario Kart 64*, *Diddy Kong Racing* had many short cuts hidden away in the levels.







A lot of collectable items were scattered around the various worlds, adding hours of gameplay that kept gamers warm over the winter of 1997.





FROM THE
FORUM

Posted by:
HAZY HAZE
Diddy Kong Racing was truly special for me. I was utterly blown away. The snowy levels were just perfect for the season. As a racing game it was evolutionary, it was also like an adventure game, and the notion of boss battles was pretty much unprecedented. The multiple vehicles slant was superb, and each felt different while the weighting for multiplayer battle split-screen was very well done. I loved the system of collecting balloons, which made the game very addictive.

Posted by:
BINARYROOSTER
Beautiful graphics and presentation soon give way to some of the most spiteful difficulty spikes in gaming history. Finish in first place and pick up all the silver coins on the way. One mistake and you have to restart the whole race. Never has a game named after a monkey and featuring a large collection of cute woodland animals had such hardcore gameplay.

Posted by:
ROTEK
This was one of the first N64 games I played, and I loved it. When I set up my N64 earlier this year it was one of the first games I played. I loved the free-roaming hub structure that was more like a platformer than anything else. It also reminded me how mind-numbingly hard it was. Who on earth thought that making the player finish first in every single race was a good idea?! Still, there was a lot of replay value, the boss battles were pretty cool, and the vehicle options were a nice touch. It also introduced the gaming world to such Rare stable mates as Banjo, Conker and, er, Pippy the mouse.

Posted by:
FATBOYSLICK
The multiplayer was nowhere near as good as *Mario Kart 64*, but for one player it was untouchable – arguably what *MK64* should have been. I loved the setup: the hub level to choose races, the different vehicles and loose storyline and secrets. The Christmas levels really sold it to me – genius.

Diddy Kong Racing DS

FOR THOSE FANS still savouring the sweetness of the original, *Diddy Kong Racing DS* cut through palates like a sour prune, but then, given Schuneman's reasoning for the game, that's hardly surprising. "We wanted our handheld team to learn the DS, and doing that with a new game was not the right choice." So Rare broke a key rule of business by putting itself before its market, and paid the price with a substandard game.

But it wasn't all doom and gloom. "Commercially it has done very well, so overall we are happy with it," adds Schuneman, and it met the initial aim laid before it: to be a launch pad and research tool for Rare. "We learned to only use DS features when it suits the experience. We probably shouldn't have used the touch capability at all [for instance] as it doesn't really suit the experience. Just because something is there, doesn't mean you should use it." The good news, as Schuneman sees it, is that the lessons learned ultimately benefit the next game. "We took the lessons learned on to *Viva Piñata DS* and we were all a lot happier with how that game plays." Sadly, however, Rare's handheld division was closed down in 2008, so we'll probably never see what else it can achieve with the two-screened wonder.



Kong Racing." Such was the popularity of *Mario Kart* that, were *Diddy Kong Racing* to be just a fun racer, it would inevitably have been slighted as a clone of Nintendo's classic. Thankfully, racing was only half of the game Schuneman had in mind. The other half was a far more innovative adventure.

No other game had attempted *Diddy Kong Racing's* feat of splicing adventure gameplay with racing, so for inspiration the team looked beyond the game industry. Schuneman reveals that the adventure element was actually inspired by Disney World. "The initial design of the adventure world was a lot more theme park based and evolved [from there]," he explains. And so the team of four worked around the idea of using a central hub area that interlinked worlds, offering discovery and adventure akin to platform games but played out with racing. Though limited manpower temporarily reduced the game – then titled *Wild Cartoon Kingdom* – to what Schuneman describes as "an early design iteration, rather than a project we actually made", it soon gained momentum. "Over a short period, *Wild Cartoon Kingdom* developed into *Adventure Racers*, and a team was built to develop it."



LEE SCHUNEMAN
Director

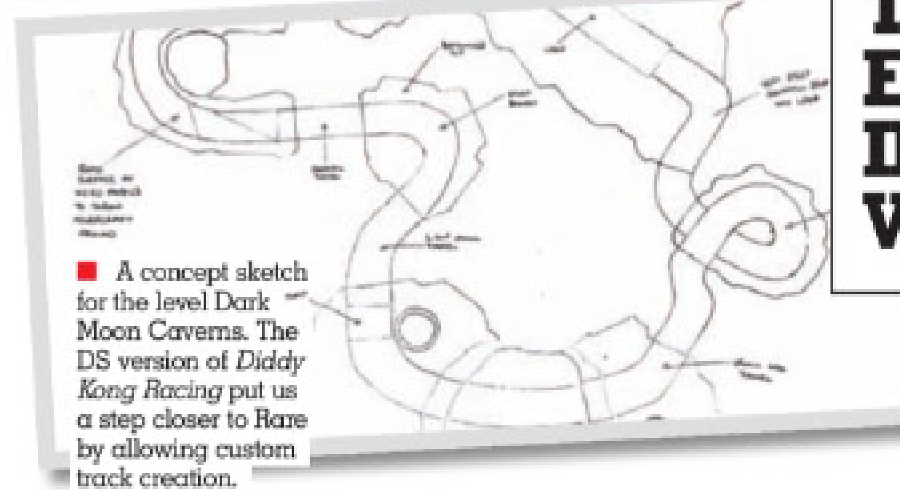
WITH PRODUCTION BEGINNING in earnest on a truly unique title, Schuneman was fortunate enough to receive a blessing most in the industry today can only dream of: freedom. "There was no specific force saying 'make it like this or like that'. There was no involvement from Nintendo in terms of content. It was the game we wanted to make." Ironically, many gamers looking back on *Diddy Kong Racing* may view this freedom as a wolf in sheep's clothing, critiquing the game as being too large, a product of unbridled enthusiasm in the production. Nevertheless, the freedom gave the team free rein to add a lot of unique content.

Schuneman's summation of the project clarifies the scope of the game's design: "The game structure was based around doing different style races – A to B, Standard, and Exploring – and doing different things on the track, such as the silver coin challenge. We also wanted some grand-prix-style racing in the form of Trophy Challenges, and because it was adventure style we then had the Boss Races." And as if that wasn't enough, they then decided to, "Mirror everything, re-position the silver coins and have Adventure 2", effectively doubling the size of an already expansive game. Why the generous amount of content? "It was just about loads of people who were really new to making games, really passionate about making a great, fun game and not knowing any better," Schuneman says with a hint of irony.

Like an artist applying paint to canvas, the emotion of the team that created the project shone through in the final product. That emotion was pure enthusiasm, and everything about *Diddy Kong Racing* smacks of it, from the cute characters and their silly voices – "I was the voice of Bumper", reveals Schuneman – to the bright colours that looked like a child had been let loose on a paint board.

Listening to Schuneman talk reveals just how enthusiastic he is about *Diddy Kong Racing* today. "My favourite character is TT. I like his stupid voice [recorded by artist Dean Smith] and he was the fastest character to drive so became a Time Trial choice. And I really liked Frosty Village because it has a great Christmas feel. Also, Dave Wise did a ridiculously catchy soundtrack." All this love and yet, as Schuneman chillingly remembers, "It took around 14 months to develop in an old converted barn with no windows, just big fans on the wall to blow in air during the hot summer."

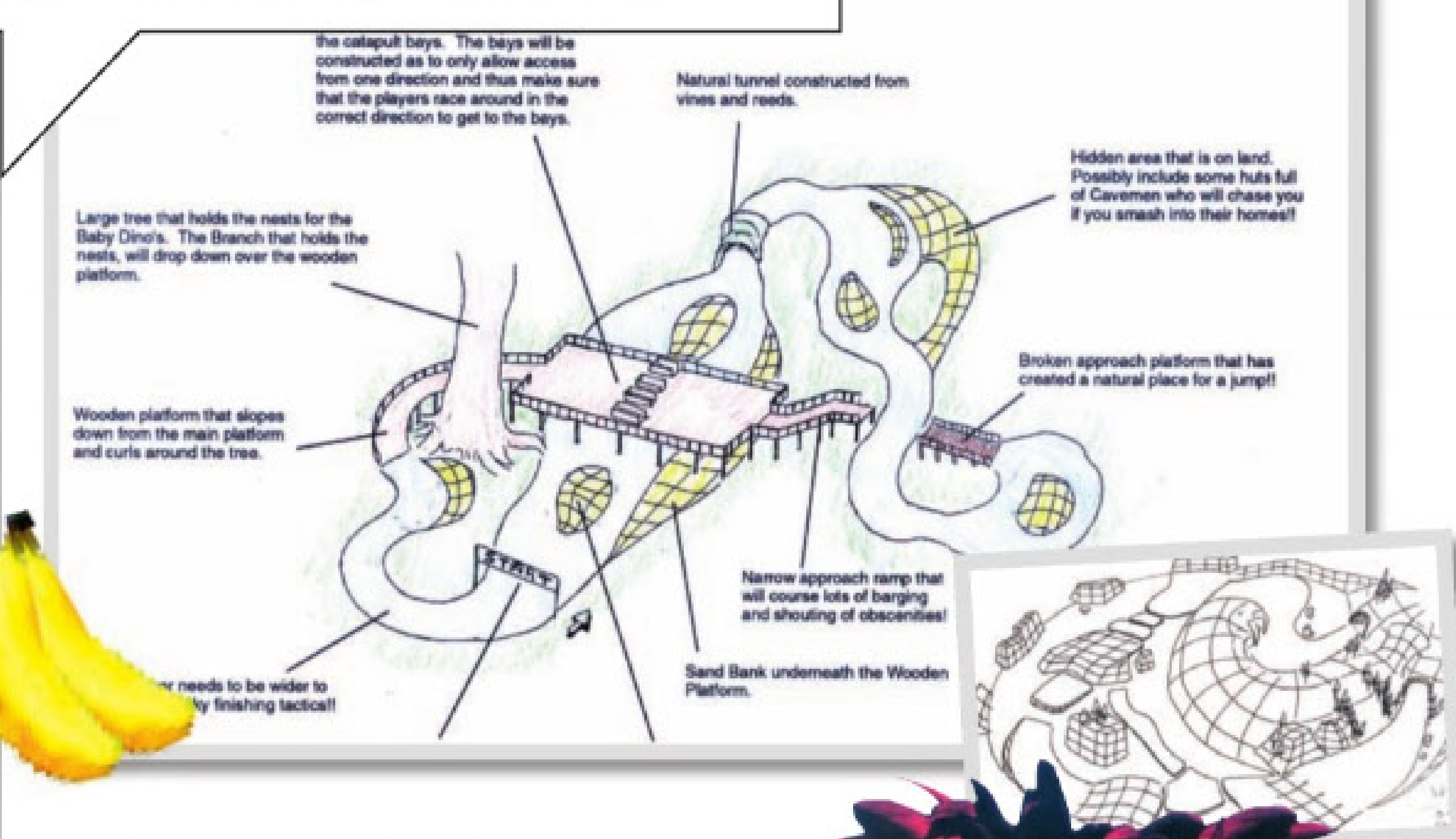




A concept sketch for the level Dark Moon Caverns. The DS version of *Diddy Kong Racing* put us a step closer to Rare by allowing custom track creation.



THE ADVENTURE ELEMENT WAS IN FACT INSPIRED BY THE DISNEY WORLD THEME PARK



THOSE 14 MONTHS were spent drafting and creating ideas. "I'd come up with a theme – 'moon surface', for example – then give the artists a track layout on paper and they'd make it look incredible," Schuneman reveals. "We would then iterate the track shape, ensuring it flowed right for racing. I would then go in and set up all the AI paths and AI levels so they gave you a good race." The direct control that Schuneman had over the project, as he illustrates here, allowed the game a vast array of imaginative content. Where the majority of titles these days have very clear plan documents, which direct, and ultimately restrict, the team's work, Schuneman was effectively given a blank canvas and told to draw.

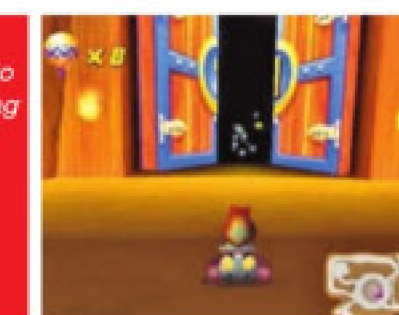
As he explains, the overall game design and world-layout were created with the express purpose of realising his eclectic visions of individualistic level design. "The point was to make each location around a general theme – dinosaurs, ice, space and so on – but then make each race track within that theme very different in style so you always wanted to see what was next." This is where the relevance of the 'theme park' hub area comes into play. By separating the central world into sub-worlds, each containing individual levels, *Diddy Kong Racing* allowed those artistic, enthusiastic ideas – which would never realistically coexist – to be included while maintaining the illusion of a single, solid world.

Though the 'central hub' technique had already been used in other games, its usage in a racer allowed *Diddy Kong Racing* to avoid the issue of repetition. Given the prominence of this problem in the genre, it's a wonder so few of *Diddy Kong Racing's* brethren have made use of the trick. Had *DKR* failed in any way, its lack of concrete inspiration to racers would be reasonable. The fact is the game received excellent reviews and even won the Console Racing Award at the 1998 CONTINUED >.

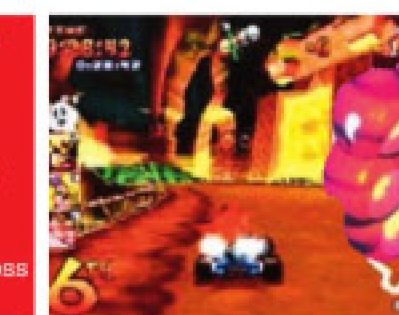
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Following in the tyre marks of *Mario Kart 64*, *Diddy Kong Racing* expanded the gameplay with a hub world, boss battles, and a whole variety of different vehicles.



DKR was such an innovative spin on the kart racer that others soon imitated it. *Crash Team Racing* copied both the hub world and boss battles.





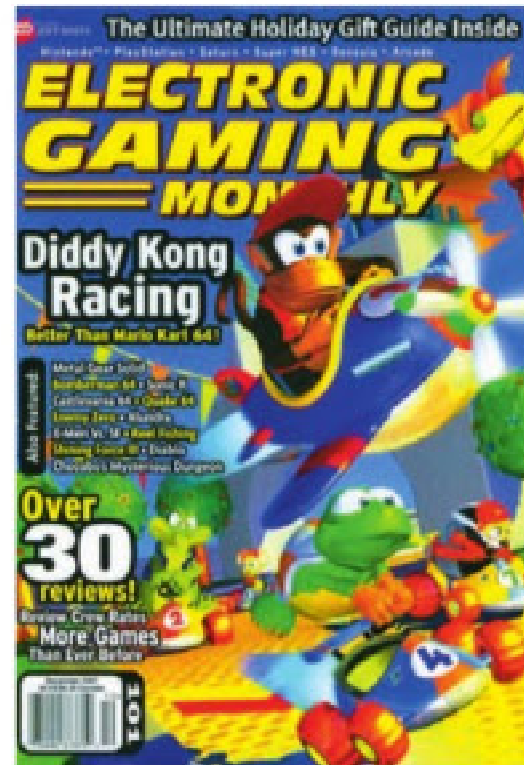


The originality of level design, in which each course has alternative routes and unique graphics, really made the game stand out from the pack.

Interactive Achievement Awards. And yet, as Schuneman says: "No one has really gone down this route [splicing platforming and racing]." This is surprising given that Schuneman places predominant credit for the game's success on "the structure and choices the game gives you", which were possible thanks to that initial hub design revelation. "You're not going to get any old generic race track," says Schuneman, comparing *Diddy Kong Racing* to the average racer. "It's going to be an exciting new world full of imagination. So the adventure structure with lots of choices, the unique world design, and the great core racing mechanic gave it strength, depth, and ultimately made it a unique and addictive game." Thankfully, the one company that saw the brilliance of *Diddy Kong Racing* was the one that mattered most: Nintendo.

BEING THE FIRST game Schuneman had ever worked on from the beginning, he was naturally keen to see the reception from Rare's parent company and publisher. In June 1997 he got the chance. "We demoed the title to Miyamoto at E3 1997. It was an experience for me, having only been at Rare for a year, to get to demo and play our game against Miyamoto." Schuneman shares his foremost recollection of what must surely have been one of the high points of his career. "I beat him in multiplayer." Thank goodness the all-too-cheery Miyamoto wasn't offended. So pleased, in fact, were he and Nintendo that they offered the game one of their lead mascots: Diddy Kong. "Diddy wasn't in the game at the time and the title was actually *Pro Am 64* – an intended sequel to NES game *RC-Pro Am*. We didn't even have cars, but instead had these three-wheeled trike things. They didn't last long." At first almost audaciously, the team of newcomers who had sweated in the barn for over a year to produce *Pro AM 64* didn't take too kindly to the idea of using one of Nintendo's finest characters in their game. "I remember we were all initially against using Diddy Kong, but it's a good job we listened in the end as being part of the Donkey Kong brand was a great plus." Not only did Diddy's visage add to the commerciality of the title, but the relationship with Nintendo also resulted in a hefty marketing expenditure. With the delay of *Banjo-Kazooie*, which was originally intended to be Rare's big N64 release of Christmas 1997, Nintendo moved *Diddy Kong Racing* into that lucrative position and backed it with TV and other marketing campaigns. Certainly, the newcomers were glad they'd come to terms with the idea of Diddy taking the helm. Though *Pro AM 64* probably would have received great reviews, it certainly wouldn't have met the same commercial success as *Diddy Kong Racing* sitting at the back of shelves at Christmas with little marketing and lacking the support of the Donkey Kong brand.

What They Said...



This game beats *Mario Kart 64* in every department. The gameplay is balanced and requires more strategy. The levels are way more interesting. The Adventure mode is a lot of fun.

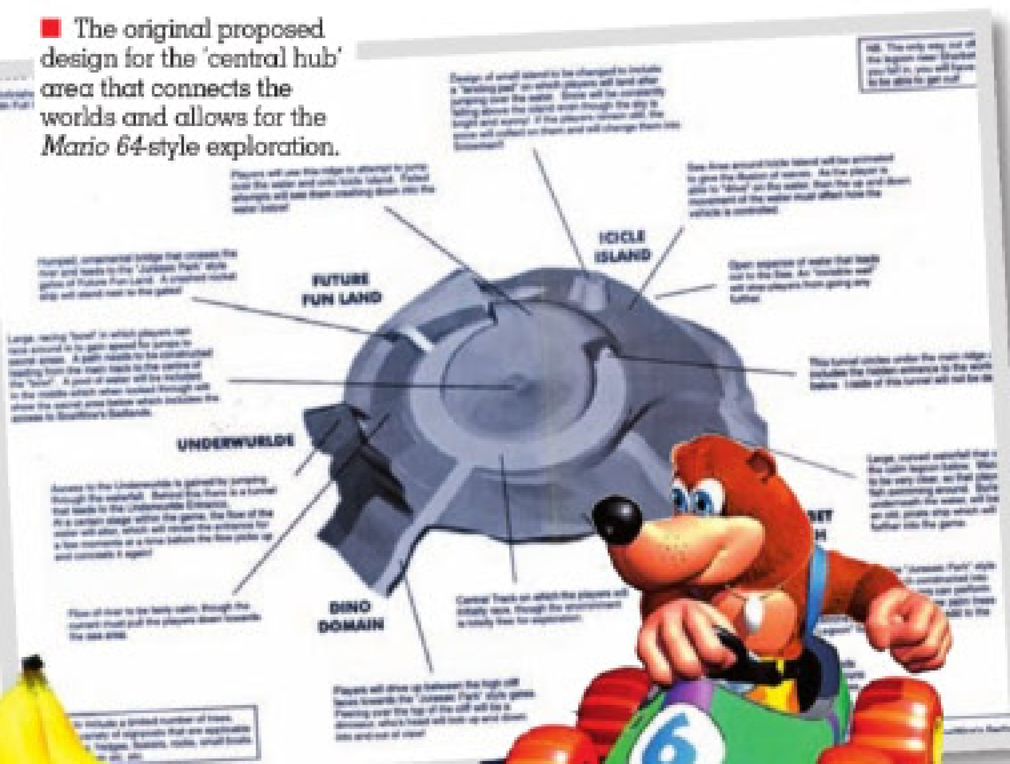
Electronic Gaming Monthly, Issue 101

IT'S TOUCHING that *Diddy Kong Racing* ended up being the big N64 release for Christmas 1997. The theme suited the season perfectly and the graphics were as sweet as the treats in our stockings, but above all, it married with Christmas in the spirit of birth. As Schuneman heartily recalls: "Most of [the team] were making their first game. It was a great development period with a brilliant team of people, so the passion and drive were incredible." Though this inexperience could easily have resulted in a misguided and ultimately poor title, Schuneman explains that, with Rare behind them, the team didn't fear the unknown, but rather pressed on with passion for their lofty aspirations. "Other teams at Rare were very successful and because Rare awarded excellent royalties – and still does – some of those people were earning huge sums of money. So when you are in a company like that, with success around you, it makes you want to be successful and drives you to do the best you can. With that underlying motivation in place at Rare and with a talented and passionate group of people new to making games, everyone wanted to produce the best game they could." And they did. For a team comprising mostly newcomers to the industry to set upon the most competitive time of the year and conquer the market is an incredible accomplishment. To do so while daring to create a unique, untested genre was unheard of. The 4.88 million sales worldwide were well earned, as were the team members' continuing positions at Rare. As Schuneman proudly states: "Most of the team remain at Rare, and a lot of them worked on *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts*."

As with any great Christmas tale, this story ends with a beginning – the beginning of a childlike sense of exploration and fun. Prior to 1997, Rare was renowned for such titles as *Sabre Wulf*, *Battletoads*, *Killer Instinct* and *GoldenEye*, all of which were stylised with mature modernist graphics and relied on perfecting gaming conventions. Then came Schuneman and his new production team, bearing *Diddy Kong Racing* – a game plastered with enough cuteness to match a *Teletubbies* Christmas special and with revolutionary gameplay.

As Schuneman ascended the Rare ladder so, too, did cuteness and innovation bubble up the scales. Though many hardcore gamers will suggest that the earlier period of Rare was better, the daring that saw the company combine adventure gaming and racing over ten years ago has moved it from perfecting other people's innovations to creating its own. But why does that need to be done in cutesy colour definition? Perhaps the truth is that Schuneman is some sort of sugar-bearing Santa Claus, out to spread joy throughout the world. Or perhaps, as the man himself states: "The annoying kids' laugh sample at the start of the game, which haunts me forever", has taken over Rare with some sort of ESRB-friendly incantation. Either way, among today's gloomy and violent visual staples, it's a refreshing change, and little cost for having Rare lead us into new gaming territories.

MOST OF THE TEAM REMAIN AT RARE, AND MANY WORKED ON NUTS & BOLTS



The original proposed design for the 'central hub' area that connects the worlds and allows for the *Mario 64*-style exploration.



The big boss Wizpig was one heck of a challenge, so much so that many critics and gamers found *Diddy Kong Racing* too difficult.



The woolly mammoth from Rare's cancelled RTS only made it as far as the *Diddy Kong Racing* prototype. We just wish they'd kept him in.



The donkey and crab below are two of the original character designs from when *Diddy Kong Racing* was known as *Wild Cartoon Kingdom*. Neither progressed past the concept stage, but the designs remain in Rare's vault to this day.

The Legend Of Diddy Kong

From 16-bit hero to 64-bit saviour

IT'S IRONIC THAT the *Diddy Kong Racing* team should have initially disapproved of Diddy Kong's appearance in the game given that Rare itself had created him in the first place. Though Diddy's concept in *Donkey Kong Country* was taken from Donkey Kong Jr – who first appeared in the game of the same name in 1982 – he was renovated by Rare after Nintendo demanded they change either his name or his appearance. As it was Rare that essentially created Diddy, taking him from strength to strength in the *Donkey Kong Country* series, it is fitting that the character should lead one of Rare's most innovative titles to dominate the Christmas market in 1997.

And this market dominance was well rewarded. Much as Diddy's visage gave grounding to what was *Pro AM 64*, Rare's game brought him superstardom, for though he was the lead in *Donkey Kong Country: Diddy Kong's Quest*, he was still part of Donkey Kong's world, hence making *Diddy Kong Racing* the first game in which he stepped into the limelight in his own right. Subsequently, Diddy Kong has appeared in such Nintendo promenades as *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!*, *Super Smash Bros Brawl* and *Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour*. Where once he was dwarfed by the gargantuan shadows of his pal Donkey Kong, now he himself stands as a leader of the pack.





THE ODD COUPLE

It's hard being odd in a world run by space marines and plastic guitars; so much of the industry continues down the predictable path that true visionaries avoid like the plague. Here, Oddworld co-founders Lorne Lanning and Sherry McKenna sit down with games™ for a rare, honest talk about the house that Abe built…

When Abe first introduced himself to PlayStation owners around the world in 1997, the lovably grotesque Mudokon became a beacon for originality and humour in an increasingly stale market of subpar shoot-'em-ups, arcade racing games and platformers. The epic *Abe's Oddysee* ingeniously expanded upon the paradigms of classic side-scrollers, with each screen a puzzling masterpiece unto itself, injected with moral and ethical conflicts rarely seen in games at the time or since. Unbeknown to the unlikely hero, Abe was a part of something larger; something so grand it would actually never be fully realised. He was just one of several cogs in the Oddworld machine, and Lorne Lanning was the puppet master pulling his strings.

Lanning was a computer arts veteran who worked his way through the ranks of Academy Award-winning visual effects studio Rhythm & Hues before pursuing an outlet through interactive mediums. But he was also a creative mind, and as a million hasty iPhone developers are quickly learning, the creative side and the business side of entertainment are two wholly different beasts. He had the intuition to know he needed a strong business backbone, but also the wisdom to know that he should not be the one to handle it.

He found this in longtime business and romantic partner, Sherry McKenna, who has been the Leia to his Solo since the formation of Oddworld Inhabitants. "It's more of a classic entertainment relationship rather than a classic Silicon Valley relationship," explains Lanning. "Infinity Ward would be more than two programmers or three programmers and a designer; people with specific hands-on skills starting to build a company. The entertainment business is more like producer-director teams.

"Sherry's a lifelong producer, and when we talk about how *Oddworld*'s a co-creation, we can split it up like this: content is largely my creation; the company and the culture is largely Sherry's creation. When you look at producing and directing in the entertainment business, that's a marriage. The best directors and the best producers, they all have the people that they like working with the most at that marriage level. I always saw that the smartest creatives have really strong producers around them. Because we tend to be flaky, we tend to be more artistic in nature. Good producing tends to be more absolutely on top of things, making sure that every T is crossed. So I think our relationship started off as a producer-director-class relationship that naturally evolved into a production company."

TO DATE, ODDWORLD GAMES HAVE ACCUMULATED OVER 4 MILLION SALES

"And then for our personal relationship," adds McKenna, "I had been married. And if you're in the entertainment industry or the game industry, it's called, 'How many hours do you work 24/7?' I just found it's almost easier to be with someone who understood why I had to break a very important engagement at the last moment. If you're married to someone who doesn't get that at all, they're very offended and they're not happy; they don't understand why you have to be gone every weekend. So it just evolved into a natural thing where we were working 24/7 together anyway and, like I said, after my experience of being married, I realised, 'Wow, this is the only way it can work.' So for the last 15 years, it's been working really well."

Like all other life forms born and raised in Los Angeles, Sherry McKenna became involved in the entertainment industry early on. After working on commercials and collecting numerous awards for her efforts, she helped produce the visual effects CONTINUED >.



The Necrum Mines played a major part in the *Abe's Exoddus* narrative.





for films throughout the Eighties, including *The Last Starfighter* (which ironically uses a videogame as part of the plot to scout real-life space pilots), *2010*, and Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, and then U.S. theme park Universal Studios' *Back To The Future: The Ride* in 1991.

After being introduced by a mutual colleague, Lanning made a lasting impression. "We were doing motion-based ride films," McKenna recalls. "Lorne was working on a Disney project. We were at my house at the time, sitting out by the swimming pool, and Lorne said, 'Let me tell you a story.' So I said, 'Sure.' The story took him forever; it was the most wonderful story and I loved it, and it was very complex. It was about how the world worked, without hitting you over the head with it. I said, 'Lorne, this is awesome; we could make a feature.' And Lorne said, 'No, no, no… we're going to make videogames.' And I said, 'What are videogames again?' The PSone hadn't even come out yet. So I said, 'I have no desire to make videogames, I do 70mm and these big attractions!' And Lorne said, 'You don't get it. This is the future. This is where everything is going.' And I said, 'Well, how do you know that?' And he just said, 'Because I just know. That's where it's going to go.' So it took him about two years to convince me, and he said, 'Let's just start our own company. If I can get the money, will you do it?' I knew he couldn't get the money," laughs McKenna. "Because we had no experience, we had nothing. So I said, 'Sure, if you can get the money to start up a videogame company, I'm there.' And somehow, he got the money."

Fast forward 15 years, and McKenna can't help but to think back on the early experiences of making Oddworld's first game. "I've been doing CG and special effects my whole career," she explains. "And I did commercials; I thought those were the hardest things in the world to do. You had 30-60 seconds in those days to tell a complete story. Then I got into computer graphics, and I thought, 'That's the hardest thing in the world to do! There can't be anything more difficult than making a motion picture.' And then, when I was at Universal Studios, I did a motion-based ride film. I thought to myself, 'No, no; this is the most difficult thing in the world to do!' because you've got to sync up the motion base with the picture. And then, Lorne convinced me to get into videogames. And let me tell you: there's nothing more difficult than videogames. Period. End of story. It is the most difficult medium to produce that I've ever had in my career. And that's the truth."



SHERRY MCKENNA
Co-founder

The obvious question is, then: 'Are games the most rewarding?', but McKenna quickly shoots down that notion, stating that her glory days were watching people line up around the block to see films she had worked on, and that little else has come close to that rush. But the unique aspect of gaming is its perpetuity. "A good thing about [*Oddworld*] is that the reward is still happening," says McKenna. "Because I read what the folks are saying about our games still, even though we closed shop five years ago, and that's what makes it rewarding. It's the reaction of the fans."

AND THE FANS did react. To date, *Oddworld* games have accumulated over 4 million sales, but one sale in particular stands out the most. Although it's McKenna's most memorable experience, she lets Lanning recount it, claiming that he tells it better. "I don't know if you ever read about this guy that we named Alf's Rehab and Tea after," says Lanning. "But he was basically a 70-year-old guy, out of the UK, who was on the verge of suicide and somehow found our game, and playing our game brought him back from the brink. Reading this six-page handwritten letter from this elderly person – who had been a war hero, who had lost a wife after a long illness and lost a daughter after another tragic accident – was just this heart-wrenching moment…" McKenna adds, "At the end of the mail, we were all crying, because he said, 'You've literally saved my life. I had gone out to kill myself; I took all the money I had and thought about what to buy with this last money,' and for some reason he bought *Abe's Oddysee*. Who knows why? And the end of the letter was, 'You saved my life.' I'm reading this to the group there and we're all crying hysterically. So to me, the happiest things – the things that meant the most – were every time I got a fan letter that said something to the extent of, 'If Abe can do it, I can do it.' Or 'If Munch is in a wheelchair and is able to achieve this, then you know what? I'm going to achieve it.' The more that the fans identified with our characters and the more that it really did change their lives, those were the happy stories. That, to me, still is what matters the most."



Incredible creature design has been present in all of Oddworld Inhabitants' games.





Fail to save more than 50 of these Mudokons in *Oddysee* and you get the 'bad' ending, in which Abe gets thrown into a meat grinder.

"I remember one day in particular, when we were in Germany," says Lanning. "I think we were in Frankfurt, and we were there for the *Abe's Exoddus* release, doing a press tour. We went into the big game store, and Abe was in the top five. And we walked by the magazine stand and Abe was on, like, three covers. And then we're walking into the music store, and Abe was on the top ten with the singles, with the music video that someone had done out of the UK at the time. And there was also a German bus that was shrink-wrapped that was all *Oddworld*. Abe was everywhere. That, to me, was a very cool moment."

LET ME TELL YOU: THERE'S NOTHING MORE DIFFICULT THAN VIDEOGAMES

"AT THE TIME I'd never thought of *Oddworld* really as niche," says Lanning. "I always thought of it as more mass-market. I think if they were films, we would have seen them as more like Pixar films than something that was niche. They had more entertainment value than your average game of the day; I think history has revealed that more clearly, in terms of the charm and the character and classic entertainment values. So I always designed and looked at it to be a very popular brand that I thought would resonate with lots of people. But then when you get into the game space, especially when you go through the PlayStation 2/Xbox era, or Xbox exclusivity, and all of a sudden – boom – the price point, *Halo*… suddenly it's a hardcore gamer's box. We were going for a more casual audience, where you'd have fun with the family playing these games; you'd have fun playing with your kid. We didn't see that coming, that the Xbox would be all hardcore gamers for the first several years. So those things changed. I always thought that the world's too fucked up to just be about making money, you know?

"I know a lot of people are about the bottom line; they measure their value, their status – they measure a lot of things by the bottom line. And in an economic world, that's important. People aren't donating to your cause, they're investing in your ideas. You need to be responsible with that and try to earn them back their money. But at the same time, what's going on in the world? What are we here for? It gets into the timeless questions. When people tell me, 'Yeah, but he made a lot of money,' I mean, the silent voice in my head says, 'Dork. That's your measurement of success? Pretty fucking shallow.' Really. All these things going on in the world, and we think that because he made money, that's the really great thing? I think it's deeper than that."

McKenna agrees, adding, "If Lorne had told me that the goal of *Oddworld* was just to make money, I would have had nothing to do with it. Most videogame people don't like me to talk about this – which is why I stopped doing interviews a long time ago – but it seems to me that when you do a videogame, in order for it to be a huge hit, it has to have some violence, and it's generally a shooter game, or a *World Of Warcraft*, or something like that, and here's Lorne telling me these stories that really were very, very provocative and very moving, and about what was happening in the world today. But since it happened on another world – the Oddworld – you didn't have to be offensive about it. What is the story of Abe? What is the story of Munch? It's not what most videogames in the day were really talking about. I had no desire to make a violent game. As a matter of fact, if you notice, Abe never carries a gun. And that was really important to us. It was really important that we hit our fans with a message, but the last thing we wanted to do was stand on a soapbox and preach, because nobody listens to the person preaching, myself included. What we wanted to do was disguise the message in a way that was really fun to play. It never occurred to us that people would consider it niche, because, as Lorne said, in the film industry that kind of a movie would absolutely be for the mass market. But when you're talking about videogames, you're talking about a unique set of demographics.

"Whether the folks want to admit it or not, this medium did not attract women or girls. And the reason is, if you describe a game and you say to a guy, 'Here's the deal. Here's how you can win. You have to blow everything up and you have to kill everything and we'll keep score.' The guy says, 'Awesome!' But if you say to a girl, 'You need to blow everything up and you need to shoot everything,' the girl's going to simply ask, 'Why?' That's how I felt. Why can't we make a game that has substance and style, *and* appeals to everybody? What we found out was, well, that's not necessarily what the videogame industry was looking for. So there's no way I would have entered videogames if I thought we were going to make the kinds of games that made a lot of money on the bottom line. Like a *Halo*. When people say 'Are you successful?', it seems today that everyone has made an CONTINUED >.



agreement that what that question is really asking is, 'Did you make a lot of money?' That's not my metric for success. My metric for success is: did the fans love it? Did you get the kind of response you wanted? Nothing's more important to me than the fans. And that the fans are still avid today really touches my heart."

DESPITE *ODDWORLD'S* CONTINUOUS success, many of Lanning's plans have yet to come to fruition. At the apex of *Oddworld's* mainstream exposure, it was revealed that the core series was designed as a quintology, with complementary stories such as *Abe's Exoddus* and *Stranger's Wrath* not detracting from the five central *Oddysee* entries. We finally had the chance to ask what went wrong. "You're right," agrees Lanning. "It was extremely ambitious. And that was the idea. It was the idea for us to think big. And, quite honestly, at the time I expected the appetite of the game audience to be a little different than what was happening, than what actually transpired. I didn't think people would care so much about the latest bells and whistles on a 3D feature or something. But if you look back to the mid-Nineties, that was heavily driving what people thought constituted good graphics or great art direction. It was like, 'Wow! 3D with a specular map! That's great graphics!' And we thought, 'No, that's crappy graphics with a new trick on it.' So it was kind of annoying to watch that happen at times. People were evaluating tech and they thought they were evaluating art."

Lanning continues, explaining the hardships of a small studio struggling to adapt to the rapidly increasing complexity of game engines and hardware. "There was always this momentum towards new and different, every time, every time, every time. What I was looking at, I thought that the tech wouldn't evolve so quickly, or that every game would require you to be on different technology. I thought you would get more games out of one piece of technology, in terms of software and development and your engine. That really made things a lot more expensive than I had anticipated. And this was to become a personal disappointment, with the whole process of the console business, which is that when a new console comes out [the platform holders] rarely provided a good toolset with it in the beginning. You wind up rebuilding your engines from the previous generation almost from the ground up. The PlayStation 2 was really the beginning of that.

"Previous to that, the game engines weren't as complex. They had other challenges with fitting on the cartridges and all these different things, but the PlayStation 2 really started introducing more parallel processing and all these other complexities that really boosted the cost of development and caused you to restart. It's like you want to write a new novel, but you're having to write the word processor again before you can write the novel. That's life in the game business."

Echoing recent events and his own troubles with publishers in the past, Lanning explains the frustrations of trying to maintain the rights to his creation: "While I wanted to keep on making *Oddworld* stories, no doubt, there's a price where it's reasonable or where it's not. Wanting to control the destiny of your property is a difficult thing today. You don't meet many creators that actually own their intellectual property. You hear people talk about it all the time, trying to do that. But the thing is: if you do own your own property, then once you start getting into centralisation of a distribution channel there are only five publishers that matter or something like that – there's only a handful of retail distributors. Then what happens is they're no longer really incentivised to push your brand. They'd rather be pushing their own brand. So that started changing in the industry as well, as the publishing community started to understand the value of brand. We didn't get that in the mid-Nineties, but once we were past 2000 – the Xbox generation – the publishers had come fully to understand the value of intellectual property and branding, especially to their Wall Street shareholders, who began to think that was the basis for a lot of their potential growth.

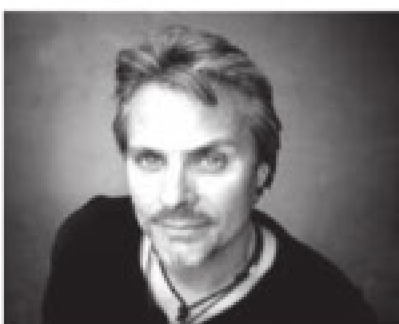
"So, all things said, the games started getting more and more and more expensive, and there's a certain point where it's hard to justify the effort. As they get more expensive, the terms get worse for the people building the games. People say, 'Wow, you're on a 25 million dollar game,' not that ours cost that much, but there's a lot of that. But if you were the one who got that 25 million dollars to build that game, that's a tremendous amount of pressure on you, to deliver and get it done, meet audience expectations and meet publisher expectations. But the problem with the industry, for the development community, is that the rewards have been fewer. If you just look at Infinity Ward, it's a perfect example in terms of who builds the product and who takes the mountainous lion's share of the money."



The Outlaws only appeared in 2004's Xbox-exclusive *Stranger's Wrath*.

WE'RE STILL IN PURSUIT OF OUR DREAMS. I CAN'T IMAGINE LIVING ANY OTHER WAY





LORNE LANNING
Co-founder





Sligs featured heavily in the first three *Oddworld* games, and came in many different varieties.





Abe's lips were sewn shut in an attempt to get him to shut up during his childhood.

WITH ALL OF these things in mind and the 20-20 nature of hindsight, Lanning contemplates the prospect of revitalising the *Oddworld* series in 2011 and beyond. "We have a number of designs that we'd like to implement," says Lanning. "It's finding the right conditions, it's progressive… We identified that boxed product was sort of collapsing… I would say collapsing on the developer, not necessarily on the big publishers yet. The thing that's really different today is you can have a better idea of who your audience is if you're going through online. When we sell our games on Steam, we can see what country is the most interested, what time of day they have the most activity, what happens in the world that causes sales to increase or decrease. You get to see who is playing your games, and the closer you can get to the people playing your games, then the better an idea you have for what kinds of games to make, and choices to make, that your audience is going to like more. So those things said, when we look at the types of products that we would want to launch with *Oddworld* today, they would be of a different sort of classical format, rather than the, 'here's the 30-hour story you're going to unfold through an action-adventure game.' It would be something that's more of a living ecosystem. And I don't mean that in terms of a natural simulation, but I mean in terms of a marketplace that would allow people to have much more custom configuration over their gaming experience. When we look at the types of games we'd like to build going forward, we want to be more settled into what we see as the new landscape, rather than the old one, which was just building huge products.



At the height of his popularity, Abe found himself on many magazine covers.

"On the new landscape, you build a smaller product, you get it out there, you try to learn more from the audience quickly, and then you help the audience have a feedback loop with you. It's a more co-creative process with the audience. You see that happening in some territories; in Asia, you see it happening with a number of online-type games where the audience is really helping to shape the experience. And I think that's more and more important as we go into the future. That's what people want – they want more control over what they do. So that would be the difference. A new product with the *Oddworld* label would be born in a very different nature."

Even in a *Halo*-centric industry, when every other developer and publisher was going right, *Oddworld* went left with *Stranger's Wrath*, a critically-praised shooter with a heart and a sense of humour. Currently, Lanning is trying to get ahead of the curve yet again with a social networking platform he and McKenna have been building for the past few years, but he leaves us with a final message from the Oddworld Inhabitants, and one we don't even have to save 99 Mudokons to unravel. "I think it's about dreams. It's about pursuing dreams. I think life is full of compromises, and you're always evolving. So, whether it looks like you're on top of the world or not, it's really about adapting to what's going on; trying to be innovative, trying to stay on top of being creative, and following your dreams. We are absolutely still in pursuit of our dreams. I can't imagine living any other way."

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight





SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1983
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Beck-Tech

Congo Bongo

ORIGINAL RELEASE **Board:** Zaxxon **Year:** 1983 **Developer:** Sega

SEGA'S CONGO BONGO is hardly the most original of arcade games. Liberally borrowing its gameplay from both *Donkey Kong* and *Frogger*, and using the same isometric perspective as *Zaxxon*, it's the sort of game that sought to capitalise on popular trends rather than create them. That's not to say it was a bad game, though. All three titles it was inspired by were fun experiences, and *Congo Bongo* lost little of what made those games great to begin with. The isometric perspective breathed new life into the gameplay, basically requiring the player to think much more three-dimensionally than before, while the cartoon presentation brought a sense of humour and personality rare in other arcade games of the time.

As far as conversions went, none offered the arcade-perfect experience in its entirety, though all claimed to, with misleading statements like "Official Arcade Version" plastered across the packaging. The Atari 2600 version was one such offender, and though it technically pushed the ageing console to its limit, the resulting game still paled in comparison to the coin-op.

The most obvious problem is that the 2600 was never going to be able to handle the isometric visuals. Nevertheless, the developers took a stab at it anyway, and predictably failed. The first stage does such a bad job that it almost comes across like an M.C. Escher illustration, its unique take on 3D perspective only confusing the player with inconsistent dimensions and shading. It's not that difficult to navigate if you've played the coin-op before, but new players, we imagine, would have had no idea how to progress through the tangle of blocky shapes and fuzzy platform sprites.

Play the second stage, and it feels like the developers had shrugged their shoulders and given in by that point. A less ambitious 2D perspective is used, making the game more playable but less faithful, and then… Then, the game skips the third stage entirely, which is a shame, because that's arguably the most interesting level – a unique hippo-dodging scene in which the hero is prone to falling in traps and repeatedly landing on his bottom.

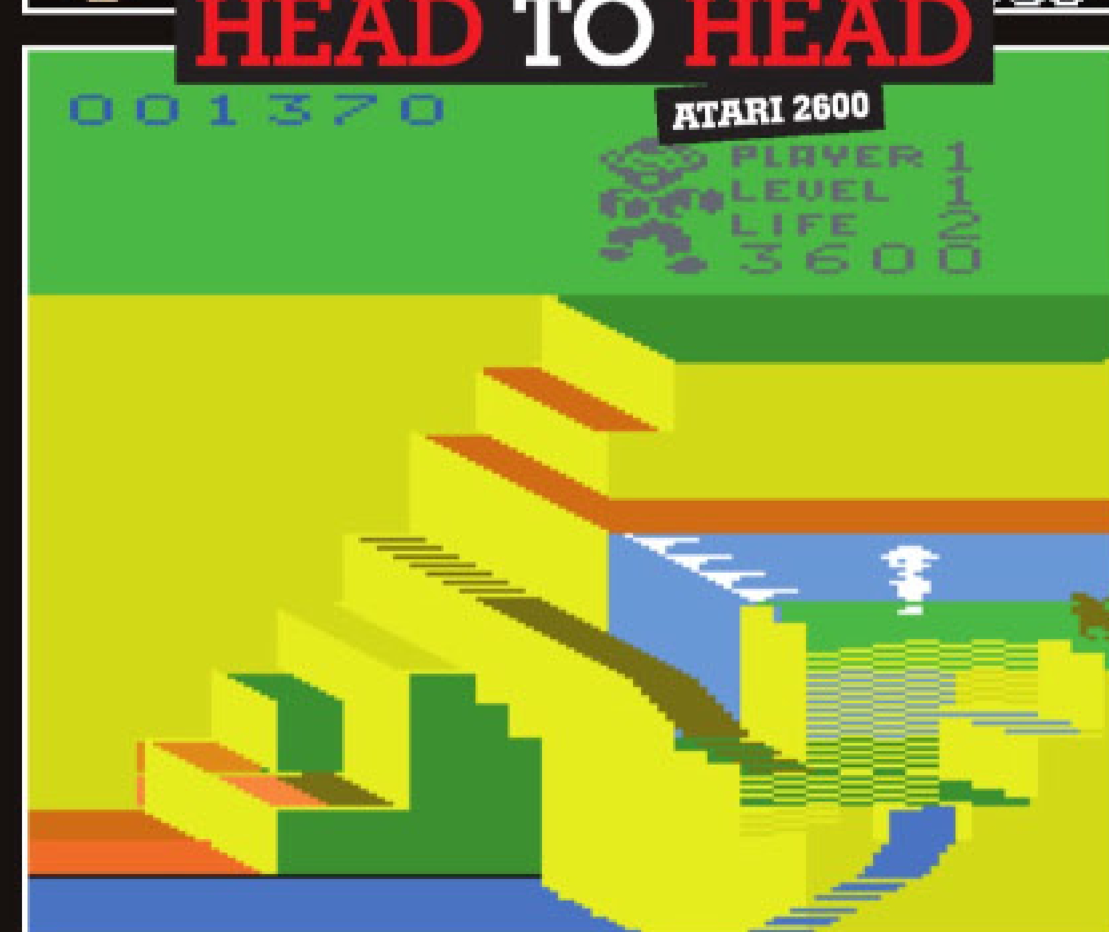
The fourth stage is then criminally presented as a non-playable animated screen, before the game throws the player back to the beginning of stage one to play everything all over again. So that's just two stages – quite poor stages at that – for the price of one rather expensive Atari cartridge.

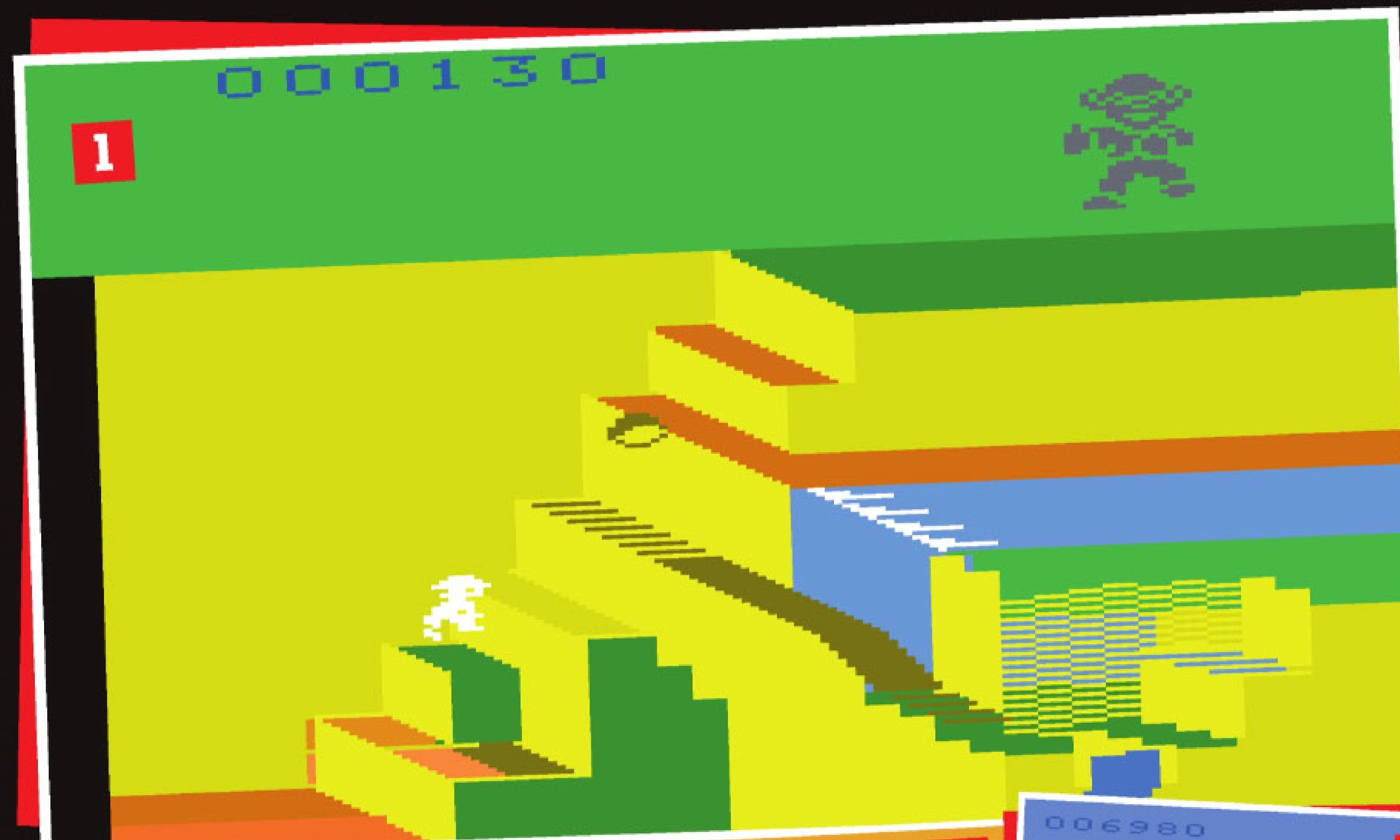
HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



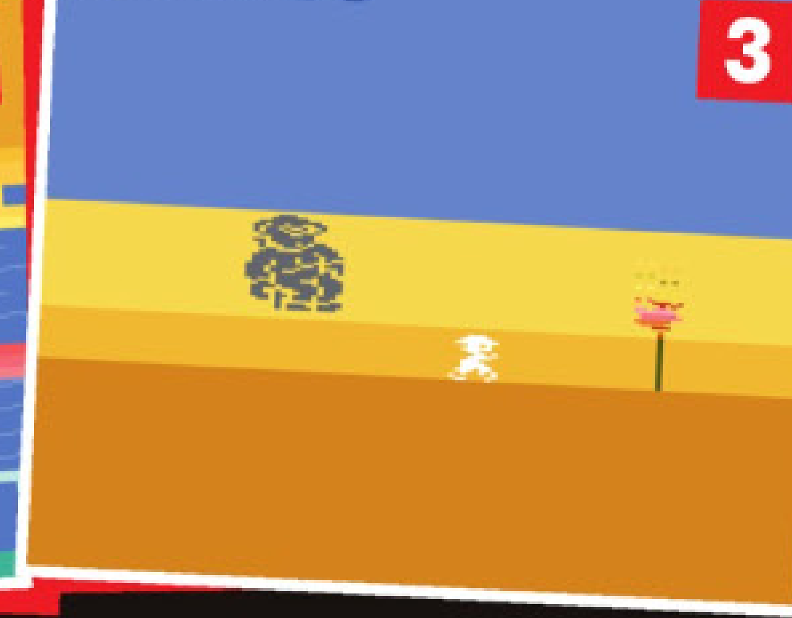
ATARI 2600





THE BREAKDOWN





1 As well as the confusing attempt at isometric visuals, Atari's *Congo Bongo* features an appallingly drawn ape sprite that seems to be more part of the background than it is the game world. The coconuts he throws and the monkeys that attack are also a bit odd, as they're presented in a semi-transparent view, presumably as a workaround for the 2600's non-existent sprite-pushing powers.

2 Can you tell that those animals are supposed to be rhinos, hippos and fish? We can, but then we've played the proper game. The rhinos here look more like albino piglets to us, while the fish look like they've been caught, skinned, battered and fried before being thrown back into the water.

3 In the arcade game, stage four mixes the *Frogger* and *Donkey Kong* styles into one level, culminating in the humiliation of the ape antagonist as our hero sets fire to his bamboo chair. In the Atari version, however, the stage is not playable and features a rather crudely drawn animation instead.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: PC **Year:** 1984 **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** Sega



Choosing the best conversion of *Congo Bongo* is a fairly impossible task, as there really is no definitive port. The PC version is pretty good, featuring a decent interpretation of the isometric visuals, as well as all four playable stages, but it still looks ugly. If only Sega had produced a VGA version.

Hall Of Fame...
Space Invader

Gaming's first villains may just be the medium's greatest icon. We reveal the brilliance of 1978's Space Invader

AS YOU MAY have noticed, the Hall Of Fame is exclusively reserved for character studies. But we're willing to make an exception. You can't really describe the space invader as a character. It never speaks, it doesn't move through a story and barely interacts with those around it other than to mindlessly advance, in formation, towards its inevitable demise. However, there two factors that make the space invader as significant as any number of Marios, Sonics or Laras. First, he has infinitely more personality than the player avatar, a faceless unnamed cannon. Second, this anonymous, mass-produced monster is still, 30 years after its creation, more synonymous with games than any of the above characters.

From T-shirts to skyscraper windows lit up like pixels and street-corner graffiti, the invader is the ultimate go-to guy for capturing the idea of videogame culture in a single, simple image. Of course, there were games before *Space Invaders*, but was there anything before 1978 to match the iconic quality of Taito's villainous alien? The text-based colossal cave adventures of university mainframes obviously couldn't, while the straight lines and perfect squares of *Pong* could literally mean anything used out of context.

So can the invader's rise be attributed to just being in the right place at the right time, simply being among the first wave of recognisable gaming icons? That has a lot to do with it, but to credit the little guy's popularity to timing is unfair on the economical yet evocative design.

Shigeru Miyamoto once famously explained the creation of Mario by claiming the technological limitations of the time didn't afford him the power to show a mouth adequately, forcing him to add a blocky moustache instead. Likewise a need to differentiate between arms and body necessitated the use of different colours for each, making the character appear to be wearing dungarees and inadvertently birthing his back story as a plumber in the process. Even under adverse circumstances, the designer managed to create a real identifiable character, but just three years earlier, *Space Invaders* creator Tomohiro Nishikado was facing even greater technical challenges, making Miyamoto's options look limitless by comparison.

Measuring just twelve pixels in width and eight in height, the invader's sprite allowed little room to create anything of detail. And with Taito's budget only allowing for a monochrome display, there were even fewer ways for Nishikado to inventively work around his restrictions. But the pioneering designer did it, creating three visibly different invaders, around the same theme but all as easily identifiable as each other.

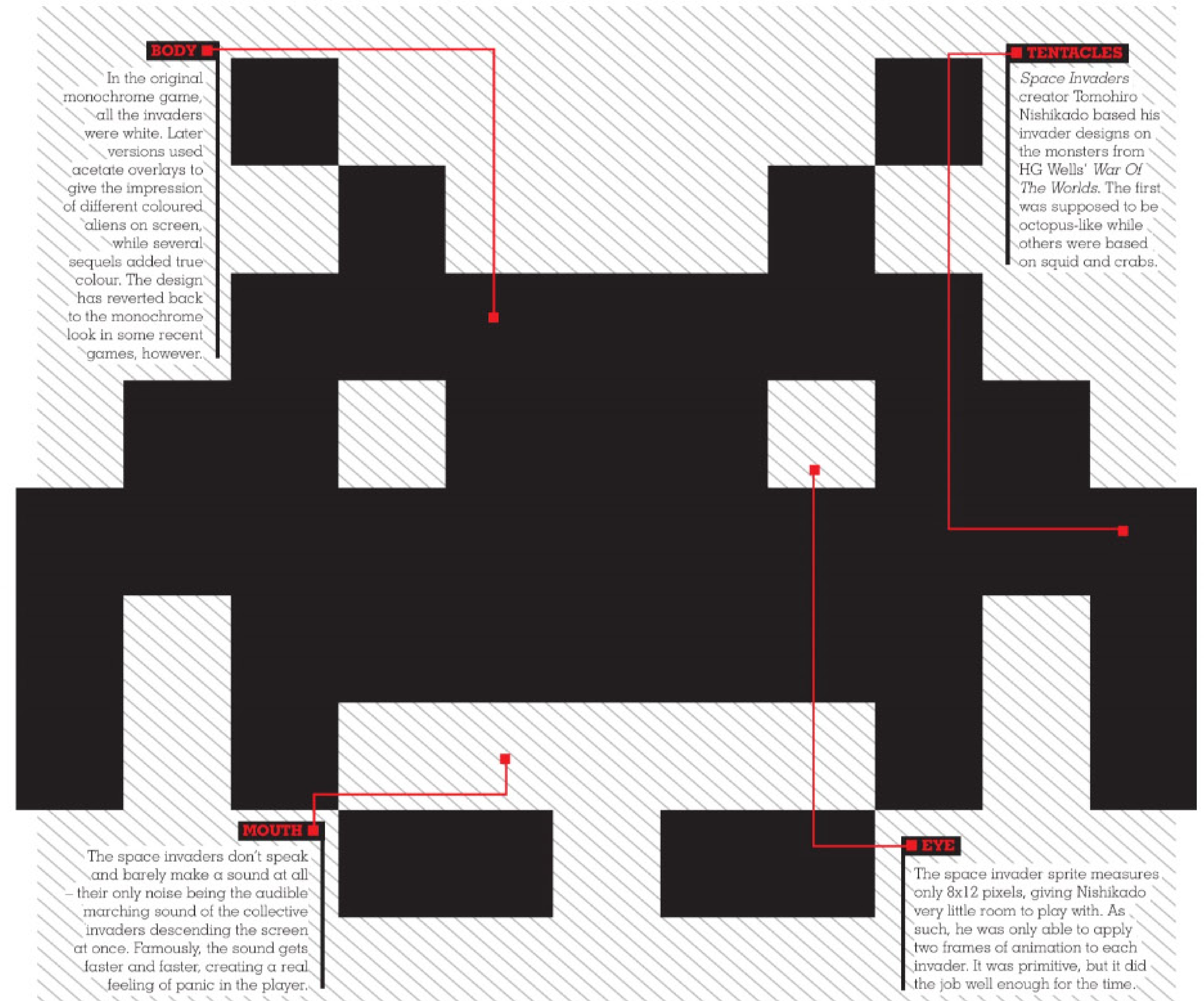
Interestingly, Nishikado's alien visitors weren't intended to be aliens at all. In his initial design they were an army of marching stick-men until Taito's president ordered that they be changed. Returning to the drawing board, Nishikado found inspiration in the recently released *Star Wars*, and sensed that a sci-fi boom would hit popular culture.

The human enemies became aliens from outer space, but they looked nothing like the bipedal creatures of George Lucas's hit movie. Inspiration was instead taken from HG Wells' 1898 novel *The War Of The Worlds*. Speaking to **Retro Gamer** in early-2009, Nishikado explained "I took the octopus-like aliens from *War Of The Worlds* as a starting point, to influence the design of the biggest enemy targets in the game. For the targets in the middle of the screen, I modelled them on the image of a crab, and for the uppermost enemies I was thinking of squid."

Despite hitting upon a strong theme straight away, Taito decided to meddle with the space invader design in later sequels. The first few were conservative in their changes, adding colour and an extra one or two underwater-style enemies. But later games deviated from the original design in some wild and crazy ways.

Sequels like *Space Invaders 95* and *Space Invaders DX* often start the game with the simple, iconic design and then quickly switch them out for much more detailed 16-bit style sprites. Crazy-looking invaders like boxing kittens or screaming blue lagomorphs pace down the screen, wowing with their unexpected appearance but somehow, despite their greater number of characteristics and broader personality, lacking the charm of their monochrome ancestors.

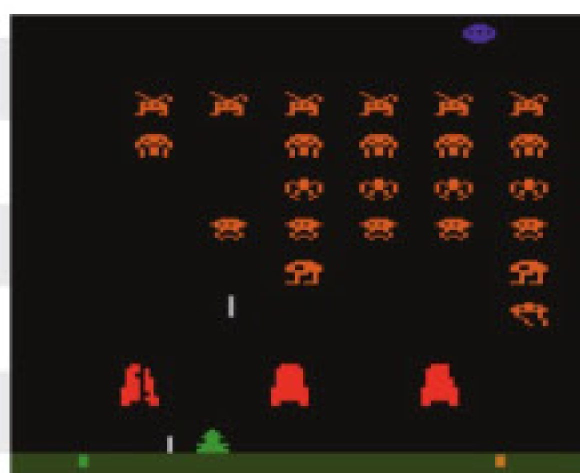
No one remembers that enemy with love-hearts for pupils, but no one could mistake that original space invader in a line up. Perhaps being first on the scene was its greatest achievement after all...



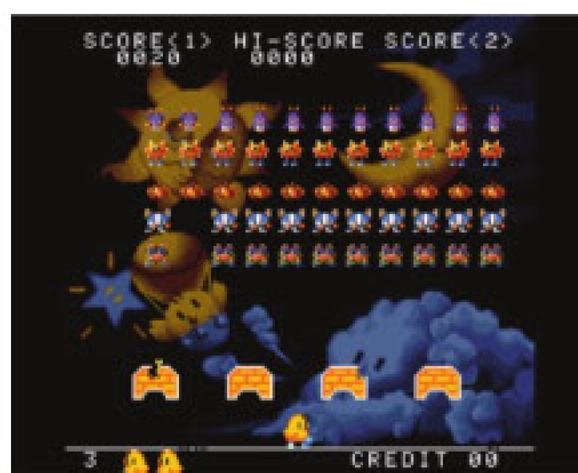
>. MAGIC MOMENTS



■ 1978: *Space Invaders* arrives in the arcade and causes a nationwide shortage of yen in Japan.



■ The invaders arrive on Atari VCS and spawn a console killer app in the process.



■ *Space Invaders DX* turns the player into *New Zealand Story's* Tiki the Kiwi.



■ *Space Invaders 95* introduces all kinds of wacky aliens and new playable characters.



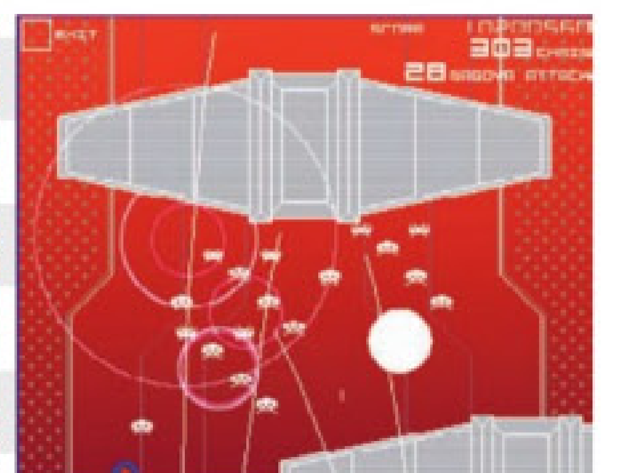
■ PS2 spin-off *Invasion Day* put you in control of a human, defending earth at ground level.



■ XBLA's *Space Invaders Extreme* adds trippy Jeff Minter backgrounds to rhythm-shooter gameplay.



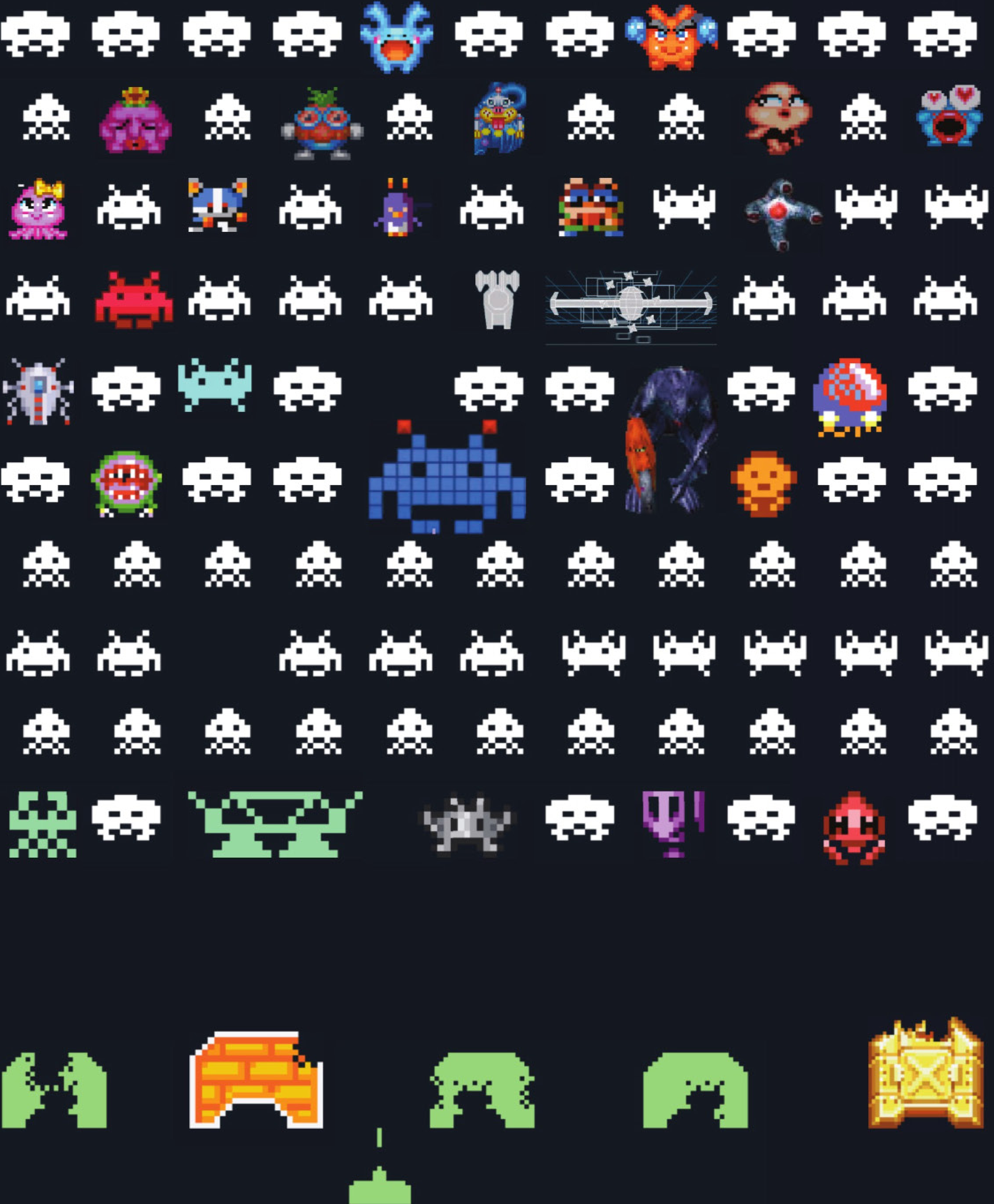
■ WiiWare's *Space Invaders Get Even* put you in control of the invaders for the first time.



■ *Space Invaders Infinity Gene* arrives on iPhone and is arguably the greatest game in the series.

THE INVADERS

THERE HAVE BEEN COUNTLESS SPACE INVADERS SEQUELS OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS AND MOST HAVE EVOLVED OR RE-DESIGNED THE ORIGINAL INVADER SPRITE DESIGN IN SOME WAY. HERE WE SHOW YOU SOME OF THE WILDEST VARIATIONS OF THE LITTLE SQUID FACE AND ALSO SHOW SOME OF THE BEST BASES THAT HAVE APPEARED ALONG THE WAY



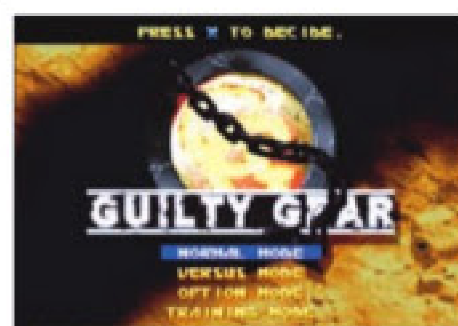
Reading from left to right and ignoring all the white characters: **[Invaders 1-8]** Space Invaders 95: The Attack Of The Lunar Loonies (1995) Arcade, PC **[Invaders 9-11]** Space Invaders DX (1993) Arcade **[Invader 12]** Space Invaders Evolution (2005) PSP **[Invader 13]** Space Invaders Extreme 2 (2009) DS **[Invaders 14-15]** Space Invaders Infinity Gene (2009) iPhone **[Invaders 16, 19, 20]** Return Of The Invaders (1985) Arcade **[Invader 17]** Space Invaders Part II (1980) Arcade **[Invader 18]** Space Invaders: Invasion Day (2002) PlayStation 2 **[Invader 21]** Space Invaders Extreme (2008) DS, PSP, Xbox 360 **[Invader 22]** Space Invaders: Revolution (2005) DS **[Invaders 23-24]** Space Invaders II (1980) Arcade **[Invader 25]** Space Invaders 90 (1990) Mega Drive **[Invaders 26-27]** Space Invaders X (1999) PlayStation, Game Boy Color **[Base 1]** Space Invaders DX (1993) Arcade **[Base 2]** Space Invaders 95: The Attack Of The Lunar Loonies (1995) Arcade, PC



BEHIND THE SCENES

GUILTY GEAR

Now a real force in the beat-'em-up field, it's hard to believe that Arc System Works' tentative first steps towards greatness happened over a decade ago. We chat to Daisuke Ishiwatari – who seemingly did more or less everything on the original Guilty Gear – about the birth and rise of a genuine contender to Capcom's fighting throne



Released: 1998
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Virgin Interactive
Developer: Arc System Works

KEY STAFF:
Daisuke Ishiwatari
Design/Production
Hideyuki Anbe
Programming

'THE MISSING LINK.' *Guilty Gear*'s odd tagline may actually be referencing its frankly silly story – in which a cast of impossible characters enter a tournament to prove their strength before saving the world from the last bio-mechanical 'Gear', Testament and his equally cheap champion, Justice – but it's also just as good a metaphor for the game's placement in the fighting scene in general. With 3D fighters still a relative novelty, players were flocking to the Church Of Polygons and leaving behind the simpler world of sprite-based beat-'em-ups, but Arc's debut fight straddled both worlds. Though still very much a two-axis experience, *Guilty Gear* would go far beyond the complexity of any similar fighter that had come before, adding intricacies and elements to shame even the era's best 3D fighters (not to mention combos that made even *Tekken*'s ten-strings look pedestrian) in the hope of reconverting a few lost souls. And while it might have worked to some minor extent, many were simply overwhelmed to the point that they struggled to get their head around the game or wrote it off altogether as trash.

Years ahead of its time in terms of mechanics, *Guilty Gear*'s system is one that many today still don't fully understand. *Street Fighter Alpha* had built upon the perfect foundations of *Street Fighter II* and added all manner of super cancels, counters, and so forth, but Arc took things umpteen stages further in one go. Several different flavours of advanced guarding, complex ground and aerial strings that borrowed from *Darkstalkers* and CONTINUED >

WE CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE FIGHTING GAME SHOULD BE SOMETHING DIFFICULT



With its unconventional characters and odd button layout, it's easy to see why many balked at Arc's fighter at the time. Complexity has since become a staple of the studio's work.













Dr Baldhead plays similarly to Faust. In later games, Arc would take his quirky move set further still.







Potemkin has always been the series' powerhouse fighter but his damage output in the original game is insane. He makes Zangief's Spinning Piledriver look positively tame...





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: SNAGGLETOOTH

I never really got into the original *Guilty Gear*; it was solid enough but just felt unremarkable to me. Really, the game it wanted to be was waiting for the sequel and PS2 release. Though it did add a competent, fresh game to a stagnating 2D fighter market, it didn't start to feel complete till *X2* and its following sequels. It still remains my favourite 2D fighter – bizarre that in a reignited 2D fighting market they haven't been able to turn out a fresh title for modern consoles. It has one of the best casts of fighting games – add together the references to rock and metal in the soundtrack and it's a winner in my book.

Posted by: BOB SYKO

I have never been very good at fighting games but with games like *Guilty Gear* I never really felt like it mattered. Even though my fighting experience normally consists of wildly hammering the face buttons and sticking my tongue out, *Guilty Gear* feels like a rewarding experience; some sort of loud noise or colourful animation seems to happen regardless of skill.

Posted by: SHADOWMAN

Ah yes, the series that gifted us with characters like Faust – a crazy doctor who wears a bag over his head wielding a massive scalpel! How could you hate a series with a character like that? *Guilty Gear X* kept me glued to my Dreamcast for hours. At the time the one thing that stood out to me was the game's beautiful hi-res graphics.



Ishiwatari's influence permeates the entire *Guilty Gear* franchise, the rock and metal vibe still helping the series stand out from its peers.



the early *Versus* games respectively, double jumps, charged special moves, off-the-ground attacks, air dashes, instant kills… it's little wonder that many were so quick to dismiss *Guilty Gear*'s brave take on a flagging genre, especially seeing as how the game did a pretty terrible job of explaining itself and why all these features were so important to the experience. On top of that, the familiarity of Ryu and Ken's moveset was nowhere to be found, Sol and Ky as close as Arc came to offering newcomers any kind of comfort blanket, while the likes of skittish Dr Baldhead and frail old-timer Kliff would almost be enough to put a casual player off the genre for life.

"BACK THEN, THE majority of fighting games were trying to appeal more to casual players, and often failing. So we came to the conclusion that the fighting game *should* be something difficult," explains Daisuke Ishiwatari, a man who played almost as many roles in *Guilty Gear*'s development as there are characters in the game. Character design, production, voice acting, planning, soundtrack and supporting art all sit among his credits on the original fighter, his name appearing with incredible frequency across a host of different creative disciplines. "If you look at chess, the movement of each piece is not so simple – it's not something most people will be able to pick up immediately. Yet people still accept that this is how chess works. So I don't believe that making games easier has any value. When creating a fighting tool, we should be making something that will satisfy users and expand the possibilities of the game itself."

Having intentionally alienated a good number of prospective players by compiling the single most confusing fighter of the time, Arc's insistence on all things being as complex as possible at least won it the favour of both the hardcore and those that thought they were. An elitist streak has always run through gaming culture, and to be able to say you played something so seemingly obtuse as *Guilty Gear* was a badge of hardcore pride. In fact, it's pride – and, to a lesser degree, naivety – that we have to thank for the game even coming into existence in the first place. "Back then I was only 21, young and quite fearless. So I thought, looking at *Street Fighter II*, that I could create something better," Ishiwatari chuckles. "That was the starting point for *Guilty Gear*. Obviously looking back, it's nowhere near *Street Fighter II*. However, the spirit of trying to make something better than that actually characterised *Guilty Gear*." A candid admission for a developer to make perhaps, though as the years have rolled by Arc's very own rock star has clearly worked on an ever-improving portfolio, so it's only natural he should be critical of the humble beginnings of his art. But for all the great fighters that there have been, it all keeps coming back to just one brand for Ishiwatari. "Of course, there are a lot of fighting games out there, and we like to try and play all of them to learn their strong points and features. So in a loose sense, we've been inspired by all other fighters, but directly it's only really *Street Fighter*."

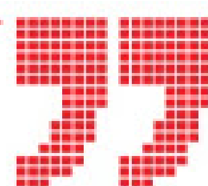
Ishiwatari, it must be said, would struggle to be any more metal. One need only throw his name into Google image search to find plenty of shots of a man who would look more at home on stage melting fretboards and faces with Dragonforce than behind a monitor working on a videogame. Today he's flying the Queen flag, a particularly nice *Night At*

WHAT THEY SAID…



The matches pass at a terrific rate because of the tearing speed the whole game moves at – normally a good feature of a beat-'em-up, but Guilty Gear takes it way too far

Play, Issue 38







Ky's rivalry with Sol made them Arc's Ryu and Ken, though the two play far more differently than their Capcom counterparts.

The Opera tee celebrating his favourite band in style. Given the *Guilty Gear* franchise's plentiful references to rock music, we start to see where it all comes from. But was this vibe a concerted effort to differentiate the game from its peers or simply a result of Ishiwatari working through hands clenched in permanent devil horns?

"When you say differentiate, it makes it sound as if we were making the game to sell more. That's not how we were thinking back then," he recalls. "I have always loved rock and metal, and always used to think while listening to it that it just worked much better as a fighting game soundtrack than the usual style of music. There were a few games that were using guitar-based soundtracks but none of them had the spirit of rock and metal. There was just nobody doing it, so I stepped up." Presumably *Crüe Ball* wasn't so big in Japan, then. Still, if it sounds like Ishiwatari was pouring a little of himself into the game, "It wasn't so much injecting a little of myself," he laughs. "That game *was* myself."

I WASN'T SO MUCH INJECTING A LITTLE OF MYSELF… THAT GAME WAS MYSELF

AS EACH of Arc's more recent brawlers has done, *Guilty Gear* impressed with its cast of insanely diverse fighters; between the 13 characters that have been with us since the very beginning, pretty much every style of play was catered for. Potemkin can drink most of your life in just two or three hits and throws, though not being able to dash forces him to be played more defensively. Equally, Millia's speedy hair strikes and the confusing Voldo-esque scuttling of Dr Baldhead (who would go on to become Faust in *Guilty Gear X*) are better suited to quick-thinking players that know their way around combos, with damage sacrificed in the name of high-octane barrages and unpredictability. Meanwhile, poster boys Sol and Ky sat in the middle of the two extremes, a decent blend of speed and power making them the perfect starting points for anyone just setting out on their *Guilty Gear* adventure.

The rock/metal influence runs far deeper than just the guitars that wail as you do battle, too – Sol CONTINUED >





Party Hard

WITH *GUILTY GEAR* and indeed pretty much all of Arc's fighters sat staunchly at the hardcore end of the table, it's hardly surprising that the team should see some of the less technical beat-'em-ups to have been released over the years as an entirely separate genre. In conversation about more recent fighters, Ishiwatari describes Capcom's latest brawler *Marvel Vs. Capcom 3* as a 'party game' more than it is a fighter, lumping it in with the likes of the *Smash Bros.* series. It's not a derogatory statement, however, as he reminds us of some of Arc's own work that he'd put in the same category. "*Guilty Gear Isuka* was meant to be a party game," he laughs, suggesting that the four-player fighter might not have turned out quite as the team planned – the PS2 fighter certainly clung rather tenaciously to the usual *Guilty Gear* tenets for something that was apparently meant to be more accessible.







May is actually pretty standard compared to more recent characters. Yo-yo nun Bridget, for instance, is actually a dude. Sorry.

GG is drenched in Queen references, Ky's Chaos Move is called Ride The Lightning after the Metallica album of the same name, Axl is clearly modeled on his Guns 'N' Roses-fronting namesake, and Testament takes his name from the metal band of the same name. "The *Street Fighter* characters were so established and had already built their know-how and skills, so there's no way we could compete on the same level," Ishiwatari states. "Instead, we wanted to make sure that each character had a whole different identity."

Crafting fighters so unique and varied rather than simply basing the cast on a variety of martial arts as so many other beat-'em-ups had done was a brave move but one which Arc managed to pull off. Kliff's comically oversized blade made Siegfried's giant sword look like a toothpick; May's huge anchor and penchant for tossing dolphins around made a nice change from the usual uppercuts and fireballs; Zato's unique phase-shifting attacks and body extensions proved a headache initially but improbably useful after a little practice. That none of this was explained properly (well, at all, really) was unsurprising at the time, and made the game seem even more hardcore as a result. Even today, only a select few fighters really make a point of selling the benefits of their deeper mechanics, so mastering the unknown felt even more rewarding than it probably should have done. Even the controls were no small hurdle for those accustomed to the usual assortment of button-based punches and kicks. "The button layout is one of the things that defined the original *Guilty Gear*," comments Ishiwatari. "We wanted to come up with something different to other games – it *needed* to be different to other games."

WE WANTED TO COME UP WITH SOMETHING DIFFERENT… IT NEEDED TO BE DIFFERENT

ARC'S QUEST to do something different culminated in one of its most controversial and initially confusing decisions: the ability to win a match instantly with a single one-hit-kill attack. Ishiwatari is happy to explain the reasoning behind these divisive moves. "Instant kill attacks were initially implemented to build tension during the game – although you may be winning, you could still be killed at any moment. That tension was something we really wanted to be a strong theme for the game," he tells us.

The aforementioned lack of explaination as to how these really worked led many to despise them. The CPU likes to pull them out pretty regularly and, while countering them isn't all that tough, you need to know what you're doing and be ready for the strike – something that those unaccustomed to the game may not know to do, of course, as Ishiwatari explains. "When we ported it for the arcade versions, it had to change. You don't want to put a coin in and get killed in two seconds. That wouldn't go down well," he laughs.



While these 'win moves' still exist in Arc's games even today, their implementation has changed considerably. *Guilty Gear*'s is actually among the fairer systems, with either a button press or perfect parry triggering a pre-kill state, from which each player can enter a command to attack, defend or even steal the other fighter's setup for a cheeky win. "That mechanic has constantly changed," Ishiwatari muses. "As things progressed, I actually considered removing instant kill attacks but we kept it in almost as an insurance policy to keep fans happy." Especially in more recent games like *BlazBlue* (where instant kills are merely a showboating way to round off a comfortable win), and the most recent versions of *Guilty Gear* where such attacks were telegraphed to the point of being useless, it has become less about using them and more about just having them on hand for a rare and flashy show of strength. "We asked a bunch of players whether they wanted or needed it to stay and the resounding answer was yes, not because they needed it as part of the game's system but because those moves characterised and identified each fighter. It's something we can use to define the characters and the world, and we're constantly searching for the best way to implement it. It also ties into Japanese culture. If you look at most samurai stories, there's always tale of a secret attack, so this secret, difficult move for each character is just something that gets people excited."



DAISUKE ISHIWATARI
Guilty Gear Polymath

With most of the excitement within the genre at the time coming from the spectacle of fighting in three dimensions, it's hardly surprising that *Guilty Gear* had to do something out of the ordinary to draw attention from its contemporaries. But rather than see the rise of the polygon as a threat, Ishiwatari sees the two sub-genres as separate entities, and ones that can happily coexist. "3D fighting games are just branching off from what 2D fighters did back in the day," he tells us. "At its most basic, a fighting game is still a fighting game. I believe that 2D games can learn from 3D games, and vice versa."

So while many were panicking and producing knee-jerk titles that went 3D for no reason and suffered for it, Arc cleverly played to the strengths of having one fewer dimension to worry about.

AND TODAY, ARC'S knowledge of its preferred genre is almost second to none, years of experience in creating hardcore beat-'em-ups leading to the studio becoming a household name. But there's still no complacency within the team, and Ishiwatari knows that there's some serious competition in the fighting field, if perhaps not in the same weight class. "Of course, it's not easy to compete with the big guys, but the reason we fight and the targets are different," he says. He seems confident that, while the original *Guilty Gear* hinted at greatness on the hardcore scene, the firm is now sitting pretty as reigning champ. "If you look at the hardcore audience only, Arc is actually much stronger than the big companies. If they want to come into our field, they will struggle – we are much stronger."

THE RIGHTS TO REMAIN SILENT

EVER WONDER WHY there hasn't been a proper new *Guilty Gear* game in years? The answer is that, with Sega Sammy publishing most of the later *Guilty Gear* titles, it appears that the publisher picked up the rights to the *Guilty Gear* characters somewhere along the way. While Arc soldiered on, creating new series like *BlazBlue* and *Battle Fantasia* to fill the gap, there's always been a feeling that the developer and its original fighting game deserved to be reunited. Thankfully, that's exactly what happened in May of 2011 when Arc System Works re-acquired the rights from Sega Sammy. No new game has been announced to date, but we'd better everything that Ishiwatari is quietly working on something special right now.



Having one person so creatively dominant on a project was common in the 8-bit and even 16-bit eras, but far less so in the days of the PlayStation.

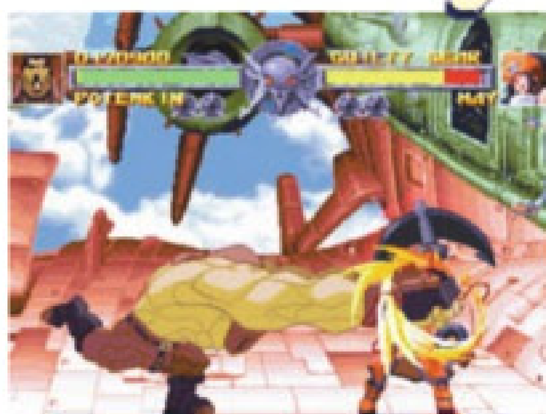




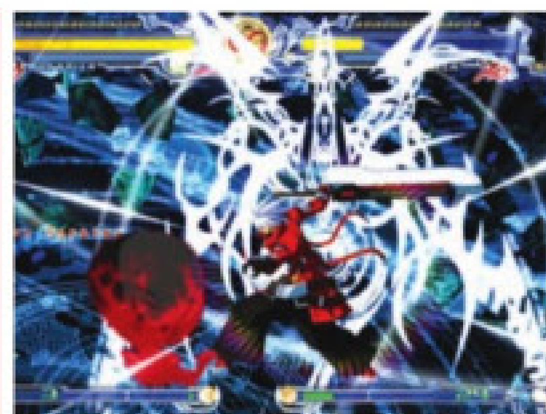
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Capcom's classic fathered the one-on-one fighter as we know it today, inspiring countless developers to follow in its footsteps.



Guilty Gear's hi-res visuals may have impressed, but in glorious 1080p few titles can hold a candle to the slick beauty of *BlazBlue*.



During *Snatcher*'s Western localisation, the film characters in the club Outer Heaven were replaced with Konami mascots due to copyright reasons

While the name Jeremy Blaustein is perhaps best associated with Metal Gear Solid and its superb localisation, he has actually been involved with more games than you realise – many of them significant releases such as Shenmue. games™ uncovers some secrets in the world of localisation

EVEN IF YOU'VE not heard the name Jeremy Blaustein before, you've likely played a game he's localised. Zpang, Blaustein's current company, has been involved in several recent releases, including *Velvet Assassin*. Chances are you also know of, if not own, the retro titles he's translated, most of which are now hailed as classics and command high prices. *Zone Of The Enders* on PS2 felt the influence of Blaustein despite him not even being involved. Enix's *Dragon Quest VII*, part of the biggest RPG franchise in Japan, was his responsibility when being brought to the West. *Pokémon* is another massive franchise he had a hand in – at least regarding the films and cartoon series.

Asking about this wide range of work, Blaustein comments on the lesser-known titles he's been involved with throughout his career. "Not everything I've done is known and there's some work that I'm so proud of I really longed for people to see it. It takes a pretty determined person to find out who translated a game though. A lot of times you put your best effort into things which don't wind up being major."

Konami classics like *Snatcher*, *Symphony Of The Night*, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Silent Hill 2* are the major titles which made a name for Blaustein, but his actual start in gaming was as assistant producer at Jaleco USA.

"After I got out of college around 1991, speaking some Japanese, I was in Chicago and so was Jaleco. My first boss, Howie Rubin, was the guy who did the sound for *Q*Bert*. We had this relationship with Jaleco Japan, typical of an American subsidiary, where the Japanese company would say: 'We have these games this year; sell them for us!' The USA CONTINUED >.

ADVENTURES IN LOCALISATION

イザベラ 私がイザベラ・ベルベットよ。
何かご用？

real cultural icon. Japanese
wear their hair like that.

was just another market, and if the Japanese teams did anything to adapt the product it was minor. I remember *Saiyuuki World 2* on the Famicom, featuring a ninja or something. Jaleco had him changed into an American Indian, with a spear instead of a staff, and called it *Whomp 'Em*. Those days are funny because the thinking was that a Japanese-themed game wasn't cool."

Blaustein's recollections of the early Nineties highlights the innocence of the era. "We would gather and look at what the Japanese were offering us to sell and we'd say: 'can we ask Japan to at least change the graphic from a sword to a little tomahawk? What can we do with the package design to make it look better? Let's call that rice ball a pizza!'"

Eagerness for the job also led to the young Blaustein landing in big trouble. "One of their games was *Bases Loaded*, one of their best series. Jaleco wasn't a huge company, and they weren't selling a lot, but *Bases Loaded* sold well. The thing that got me fired was I tried to write a Japanese letter asking for things to be changed in the game. But I was like 19-years-old and I'd only studied Japanese for a couple of years. I really didn't speak Japanese very well and I certainly didn't know the culture. He said I can't understand this letter! I got really mad, and that was it for Jaleco. But it was enough time for me to introduce them to my twin brother Michael, who started working for them. Then I was off to graduate school, and eventually Japan teaching English."

BY THIS TIME Michael had moved on to Konami USA and repaid the favour by arranging an interview for Jeremy at Konami Tokyo. "I got the job at Konami Japan in 1993. I was in the International Business Department and the only foreigner among 1,100 Japanese staff!"

He was desperate to break into R&D, designing actual games, but found it almost impossible. As a native English speaker, though, he was asked to provide text for games, writing the dialogue and gags for titles such as *Animaniacs*. His first official work on an English localisation was for *Snatcher* as a producer, when he was called in by Yutaka Haruki of Research & Development 6 to play the PC-Engine CD version and evaluate if it would be suitable for porting to the American Sega CD.

While Blaustein is regarded as synonymous with *Snatcher* and its excellent localisation, he was keen to point out that it was actually Scott Hards who did the initial translation. "I feel Scott doesn't always get enough credit, but that's why I've done my best to get his name out there. In those days, no translator ever got credit. Scott wrote some funny stuff and I played around with it quite a bit as well." Blaustein oversaw numerous aspects of the English version, including the dialogue recording in Chicago and adding the in-game phone conversations with himself and other staff members.

Despite being credited on a large number of Konami titles, Blaustein was actually a freelance localiser, having left after *Snatcher*. "When I left Konami and went freelance, it was as CDs were becoming the dominant medium. This allowed much more focus on text, story, plot, dialog – which in turn allowed me to stretch my wings with the translation."

In 1997 Blaustein was tasked with localising *Symphony Of The Night*, though he stresses he was not responsible for directing the voice acting and was not happy with how it turned out. Asking further brought up fascinating revelations. "I had to do quite a bit of research for *Symphony Of The Night*, since I needed names for the mythical creatures and items. So I stuck my daughter's name Zoe in there with the 'Cube of Zoe' item. I actually think that my daughter may perhaps be where Kojima heard the name for later use in the *Zone Of The Enders* acronym. He would have first heard it on our company vacation when I was at Konami in 1994, when she was born, then again when we worked together on *MGS* in 1998. It's unlikely that he runs across the Western name Zoe in any of his social circles in Japan, so I'd imagine that it was named after my daughter."




Jeremy Blaustein is a black belt in matsubayashi-ryu karate.


While at Jaleco Jeremy saw NES games like *Saiyuuki World 2* transformed into *Whomp 'Em*, because the perception was that Japanese was uncool.


For *Velvet Assassin*, Zpang translated from English into other languages. Blaustein's company works with Spanish, French, Italian, German, Portuguese, Korean, Chinese and, of course, Japanese.

A fresh-faced Jeremy (bottom left) at the Konami Sports Day (undokai) at the Tokyo Dome in 1994.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

More Blaustein for your buck

OTHER MEMBERS OF the Blaustein family have been involved in games. His elder sister Maddie Blaustein, who sadly passed away in 2008, is featured in *Valkyrie Profile*. "I put together the voice cast in NY made up of *Pokémon* voice actors, including my sister Maddie (who did Meowth). I am so glad we worked together – I will always remember it. She did a whole bunch of voices and I did a few myself. That happens more often than you think! The game itself was so beautiful and dramatic that I wanted to do the best we could on the limited budget. I think we got some great performances. Did the fans like it?"





POKÉ-LISATION

WHEN NOT DEALING with games Blaustein is also involved with television, film, and anime. Among a long list of work he's translated are the romantic comedy *Summer Nude*, G4 series *Ninja Warrior*, plus five *Pokémon* films and the cartoon series. "When I meet people they say, 'Oh wow, you did *Pokémon*? My kid will want to talk to you!' Unfortunately it's not like I have a lot of *Pokémon* plush toys or anything."

So does that make Blaustein a world-class expert? "I would say I am a *Pokémon* expert, unless of course you compared me to the average 6 or 7 year-old, in which case I would probably prove to be hopeless. Most nights of the week I entertain my son with home-made Pokémon stories."

And are there things people might not realise about *Pokémon*? "Pokémon USA asked us to remove any indications of Pokémon gender. Even though in the Japanese episodes their gender is often given away."

Afterwards came *Metal Gear Solid*, one of the biggest titles he worked on, and one which garnered both the most praise from fans and brought Blaustein the most regrets. "I didn't play things politically smart, but I sure put my heart into that translation." Blaustein spent six months slaving over the script for *MGS*. The game included an unprecedented amount of audio and video and, since all the video for cut-scenes had already been done and could not be reworked, Blaustein had to make the English script match each character's 'lip flap'.

ONE BIG CONCERN was the character names. "I said to Kojima, if I'm going to do the job you're giving me, we need to come up with names which are different and will have the same foreign quality to a Western ear as they do to a native Japanese speaker. Because it sounded ridiculous for a character to call themselves Decoy Octopus. To the degree that you can call a James Bond movie sophisticated, it doesn't even reach that level." Due to Kojima's insistence, the names stayed. In the end Blaustein thinks they worked, but perhaps not for the reasons Kojima intended.

Otherwise everything was meticulously tweaked until he felt it was perfect, no matter how brief the scene was. "I rewrote and polished that entry scene in the submersible until it glowed. It was challenging because the inverted word order of the Japanese meant that the montage graphics were also inverted. It's a lot like working on a crossword puzzle. I'm proud of it, though I'm not sure people would appreciate how much work it represents."

Blaustein also researched appropriate military jargon, in some cases inventing it, and he toned down the saccharin nature of certain character relationships. Fans loved it and *MGS* became a bestseller, but after retranslation back into Japanese for *MGS: Integral*, Kojima took note of the changes and was not happy. "I have a lot of regrets, because you only get one chance in life. Most notable would be the misunderstanding between me and Kojima. He never really understood how hard I tried to do exactly what I thought he wanted. And he got some bad advice about what did happen." As a result, Blaustein wasn't allowed to work on any further instalments, and it affected the way Kojima handled the series from then on. "He had very high demands for a direct translation in his next games, and he increased the number of people looking over the shoulder of the translator."


For Silent Hill 3 Jeremy reprised his role as translator and director for voice-acting.

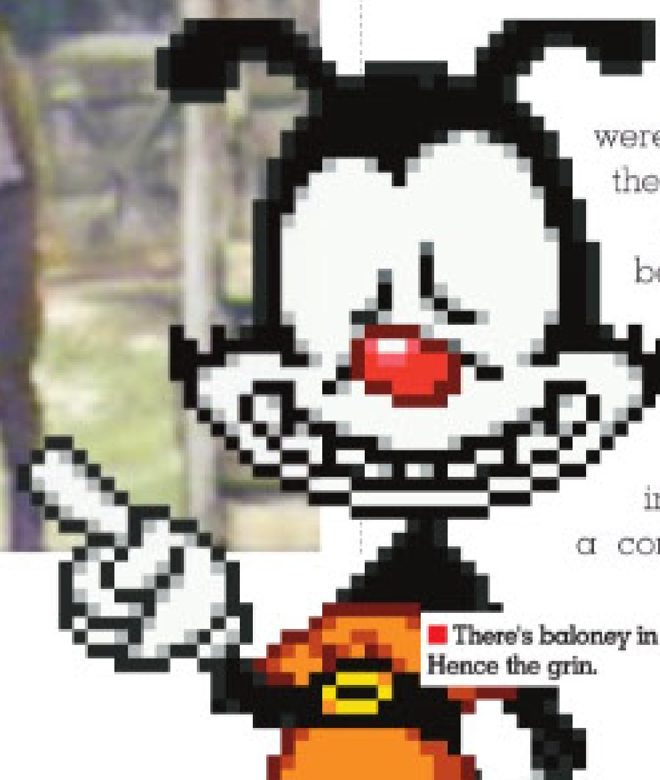

Working alongside the voice-acting crew from Silent Hill 3.

AFTER RETRANSLATION INTO JAPANESE, KOJIMA NOTED THE CHANGES AND WAS NOT HAPPY

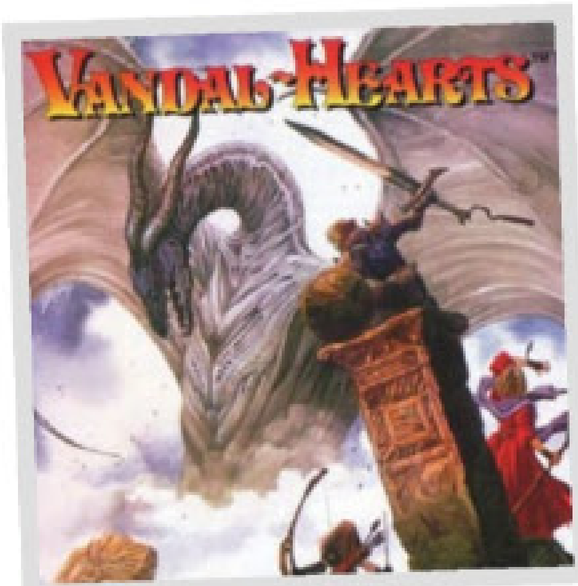
MGS, along with the PlayStation, also defined a shift in industry attitudes for Blaustein. "In my opinion the move to CDs and to greater amounts of 'eye candy' had some negative effects – and *MGS* is emblematic of this. Kojima wasn't really interested in gameplay. He was all about story and appearances, like a fan of Hollywood movies. For me, the guys that 'got' gameplay were the ones working on *Contra*, *Castlevania*, things like that. Well-designed 2D scrolling levels were raised to an art form at Konami in the 16-bit era."

Another game considered Blaustein's best work is *Silent Hill 2*, where he had a role in development. "In Konami's mind it was a game they were making for the foreign market, one which was going to do better in America. So I was called in as a consultant for the game, CONTINUED >.


Jeremy's twin-brother Michael (pictured far right) was a gun-wielding bad guy in Konami's *Lethal Enforcers II*.


There's baloney in their slacks. Hence the grin.

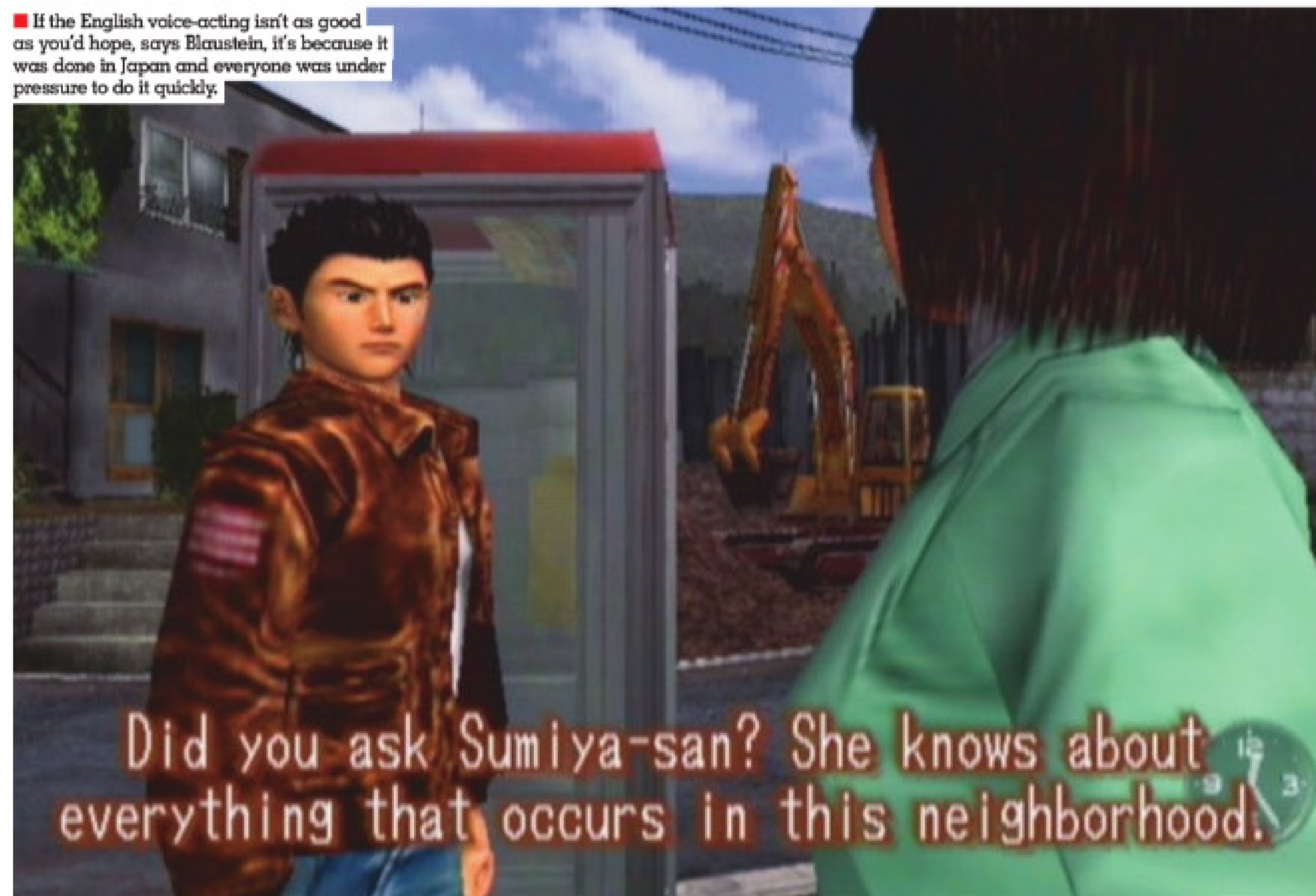
JAPAN'S BIGGEST RPGS



BLAUSTEIN HAS BEEN involved with some important RPGs, including *Vandal Hearts*, *Suikoden II*, *Valkyrie Profile*, *Shadow Hearts*, *Dark Chronicle* and Enix's *Dragon Quest VII*. It was *DQVII*, part of Japan's longest running and biggest RPG series, which gave him the biggest headache. "Not so much the translation, but organisationally. Given the massive size of the project, over a million words, I decided to partner with a friend and a brilliant software designer. The software used was a unique online translation tool allowing many translators to work simultaneously and see each other's work, thereby maintaining consistency across the whole game. But there were the inevitable technical issues – we had problems re-adding the game code to the game after first having stripped it out for the translation. We got it done, but there were some hairy deadlines and late night-coding events."



With leftover space on the *Snatcher* disc, Blaustein included a series of funny dialogues should you phone him in-game. You're introduced to his wife Chie, listen to Buddy Guy music, and his cat Kiwi turns out to be a Snatcher!



If the English voice-acting isn't as good as you'd hope, says Blaustein, it's because it was done in Japan and everyone was under pressure to do it quickly.

working with the team, because they wanted to have a conversation prior to even creating a story. Anyway, one guy asked 'can we do incest, or can we do this?' and they had different directions they wanted to go in. They wanted to know, how would Americans react to a baby eating another baby, or whatever. What's scarier for Americans: is a baby with fangs scarier than a zombie nurse? Because they knew they were skating on the edges of some dangerous themes, and they wanted to, but there are some things you can do in Japan that you can't do in America, and vice versa."

WHAT'S SCARIER FOR AMERICANS: IS A BABY WITH FANGS SCARIER THAN A ZOMBIE NURSE?

SH2 contained a complicated and emotional narrative open to much interpretation. Fans have debated it for years, but Blaustein answered the question of Angela's abuse, which was only hinted at. "I can tell with 100 per cent clarity on the subject that it was always the intention of the creators that Angela's background contained sexual abuse at the hands of her father. In return, she stabbed him to death. That is why she is in Silent Hill." We also asked if the endings were finalised early on in the process. "Yes, somewhat. But not much. The specifics of the endings were not fully fleshed out until later – they were added and thought out last. However, they *did* know they would be doing a dog and UFO ending."

IT ALSO GAVE Blaustein the chance to work alongside famed Konami composer Akira Yamaoka. "He's a terrific guy. His father and uncle are both chefs. His father is a brilliant pastry chef and his uncle is a famous Chinese gourmet chef who has written books. He made me a 12-course Chinese meal for my birthday. Me and the whole *SH* team ate there – a meal I will *never* forget."

Without doubt though, the biggest and most expensive game Blaustein was involved with has to be *Shenmue*. "It was like Shakespearean tragedy, you know? *Shenmue* was so ambitious, and it made so many mistakes, you could use it as a warning about all the ways that you can go wrong in doing a localisation. Or even a game! There was this huge meeting: imagine the most hi-tech table, with things like a TV that pops up from the centre, and everyone gathered around like the Knights of the Round table, and Yu Suzuki sitting there at the front and all these people around him like servants, all to discuss the kick-off of *Shenmue*, which was going to be the greatest, most expensive game ever for the new system that was going to be the 'giant killer'."

"My company at the time, IMagic, wanted but didn't get the localisation job because, I think, Suzuki had a brother-in-law who had a translation agency – one of these deals or something. But we got hired to arrange the English voice-acting. And unfortunately Suzuki, wanting to oversee the project from Japan, didn't want it done in America. The arrogance of it all was incredible, because they've got all these people to advise them and then, in the end, he didn't want to hear any advice about how to do it. We were all certain it was a mistake to do all the voice recording in Japan."

The problem was worsened by *Shenmue*'s massive cast. "In Tokyo, or even all of Japan, if you gathered up all the English voice actors in a room, and you threw away the ones that sucked so bad that they shouldn't be on any videogame, you wouldn't have enough people. Everyone involved was doing it under pressure, as fast as they could do it. I'm telling you, scripts were coming in and they were being faxed directly from the translator to the recording studio with the worst actors you ever want to see."

DISCOURAGED BUT DETERMINED to do the best job possible, Blaustein took some emergency steps. "So I went to America and I auditioned actors in New York. Can you believe that? There weren't enough actors in Japan, and there wasn't anyone good enough, and there was this ridiculous $70 million budget, so stuff that I would never have considered I was forced to do. I picked up two people in the US. One was a newcomer, Corey Marshall, and the other was an experienced actress, Debora Rabbai. We signed them to a contract and sent them to Japan. The first and last time that will ever happen".

Having been responsible for enabling the West to enjoy some of gaming's biggest and most important properties, the question is: what's next? Now permanently back in Japan, Blaustein is gearing his company Zpang for some big projects. "We're doing a lot of MMORPGs, such as *Uncharted Waters*, and I'm branching into iPod applications. I'm going to be a part of the development team with a vested interest in the project."

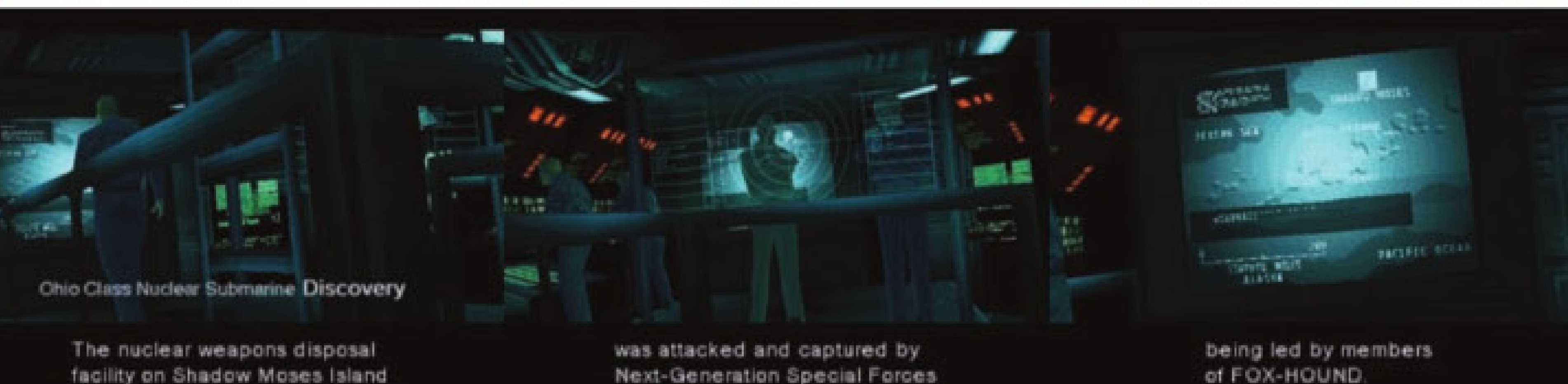
While we can't print the name of Zpang's next intended project due to non-disclosure agreements, we can confirm that Blaustein is fighting to bring about the localisation of an exciting Japanese retro title. "It's got a unique style that would never be considered today. Few would pony up the money to localise it, because it would never sell enough units to pay for its localisation cost. This is a really well-loved piece of work that has stretched deep roots into Japanese videogame culture. The fact that it has never been localised is very sad."



There were 108 recruitable characters in *Suikoden II*, each with their own unique personality – not to mention the bad guys and random NPCs!



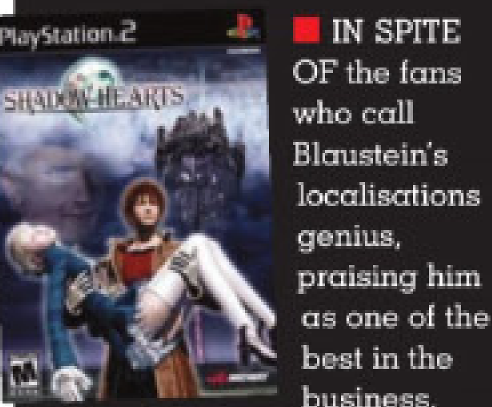
Recently, Jeremy has been working on a lot of MMORPGs, including an update to the classic *Uncharted Waters* series.



The opening SDV (swimmer delivery vehicle) scene was rewritten several times, while the OSP military-jargon used towards its end was invented by Blaustein.

Shloop! Shloop!

Even a localisation master can have his off-days



IN SPITE OF the fans who call Blaustein's localisations genius, praising him as one of the best in the business, he's reluctant to accept the praise unreservedly. "If I can claim responsibility for some of the best stuff, then some of the worst can unfortunately be laid at my feet too. If you look on Youtube, type in 'Shadow Hearts Sea Mother', you'll catch one of my worst faux pas. There was this long vocal telling of a story in Japanese, in an old woman's voice. Like, bizarrely long – like why would anyone record something so long? But we had to do it. You listen to it and near the end it's like 'Shloop! Shloop!' I don't know what I could have done differently, perhaps told them to move it along faster, but it's my uneven recollection that it was done remotely from me because we had to add it later."



Scott Hards came up with the idea for *Neo Kobe Pizza*, but Jeremy has a few ideas of his own – like sprinkling the pizza with nori seaweed before baking and submerging it in miso soup.

* Special thanks to Kurt Kalata and ShenmueDojo for donating images

BEST BOSS

AXELAY SNES [Konami] 1992

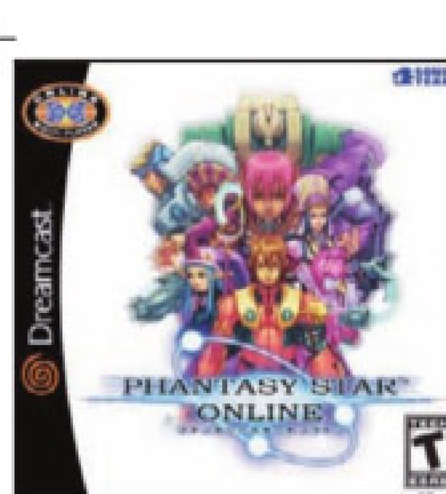
■ Shoot-'em-ups are infamous for their use of huge end-of-level bosses, and they certainly don't come much more huge than those in *Axelay*. This cult Konami shooter alternates between horizontal and vertical scrolling levels, the latter utilising SNES's Mode 7 display to create enormous 3D-effect monstrosities. The greatest of these is easily Level 5's lava boss Wayler, who is so cool, in fact, that Konami used his image on the game's packaging. Too bad *Axelay* is so difficult to play that few ever managed to find their way to the end of Level 5, and consequently never got to experience this extremely memorable boss for themselves.



BEHIND THE SCENES

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

With a sequel due to be released this year, we sit down with famed Phantasy Star Online creator, Yuji Naka, as well as PSO's main designer and art director, Satoshi Sakai



Released: 2000
Format: Dreamcast, PC, GameCube, Xbox
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sonic Team

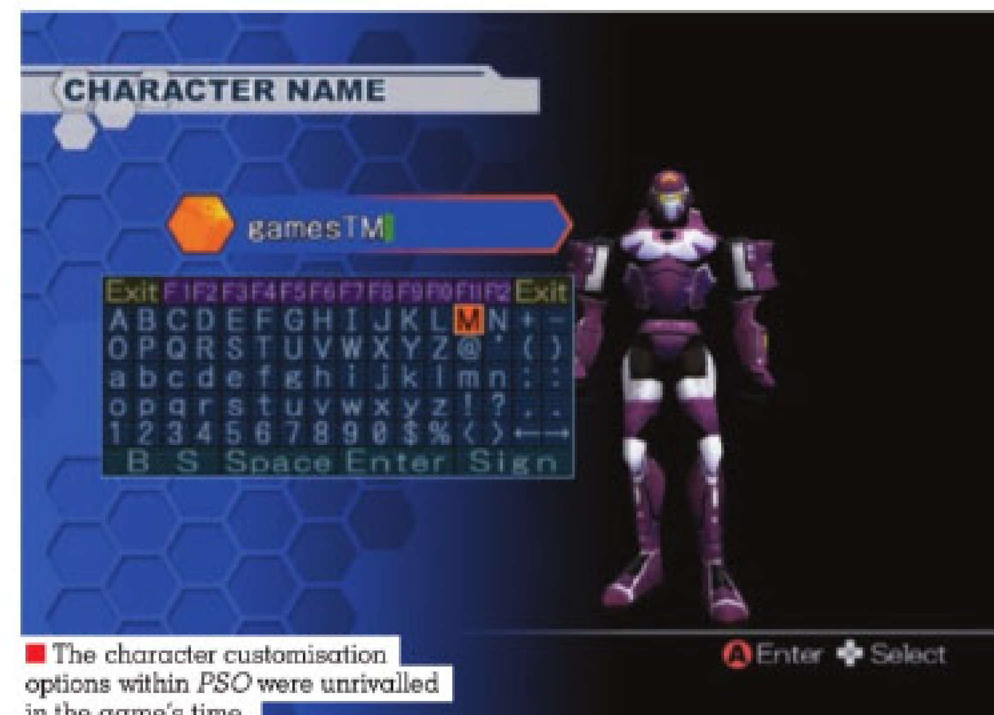
KEY STAFF:
Yuji Naka
Producer
Satoshi Sakai
Main Designer/Art Director
Takao Miyoshi
Director
Fumitaka Shibata
Sound Director

YUJI NAKA IS the king of his own world and he knows it. He carries himself with the relaxed, confident attitude of a man who feels that failure is impossible. He is informal and passionate. His formal, considered conversational style betrays the fast-and-loose speech of his Kansai heritage. Whether it's his fame or sheer natural ability, the 45-year old game designer knows how to secure the full attention of everyone in the room. It's that kind of leadership he brought to his teams when he created the most popular games ever to come out of Sega, the two most important of which are, without a doubt, *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Phantasy Star*. Both games were so successful that, even in Naka's absence (he left the company in 2006), Sega is still trying to replicate their secret formula.

We meet Naka on the first floor of the main building on Sega's campus, located in a nondescript and fairly quiet Tokyo business district. Young employees who never had the chance to work with Naka gawk and stare, while trying to pretend they didn't notice. Even though he doesn't work there any more, Naka carries himself like he owns the place. The only moment where his calm seems to fade is when he's asked to put on a visitor's badge. "Does that feel strange?" we ask him. "Yeah. A little," he replies with a laugh.

We're at Sega to talk about *Phantasy Star Online* with Naka and art director Satoshi Sakai. The game turns ten years old this month, and, even though we didn't know it at the time of our CONTINUED >.

I KNEW IT WOULD BE 3D AND IT COULDN'T LOOK CHEAP. IT HAD A COMIC-LIKE LOOK TO IT AT FIRST



The character customisation options within *PSO* were unrivalled in the game's time.



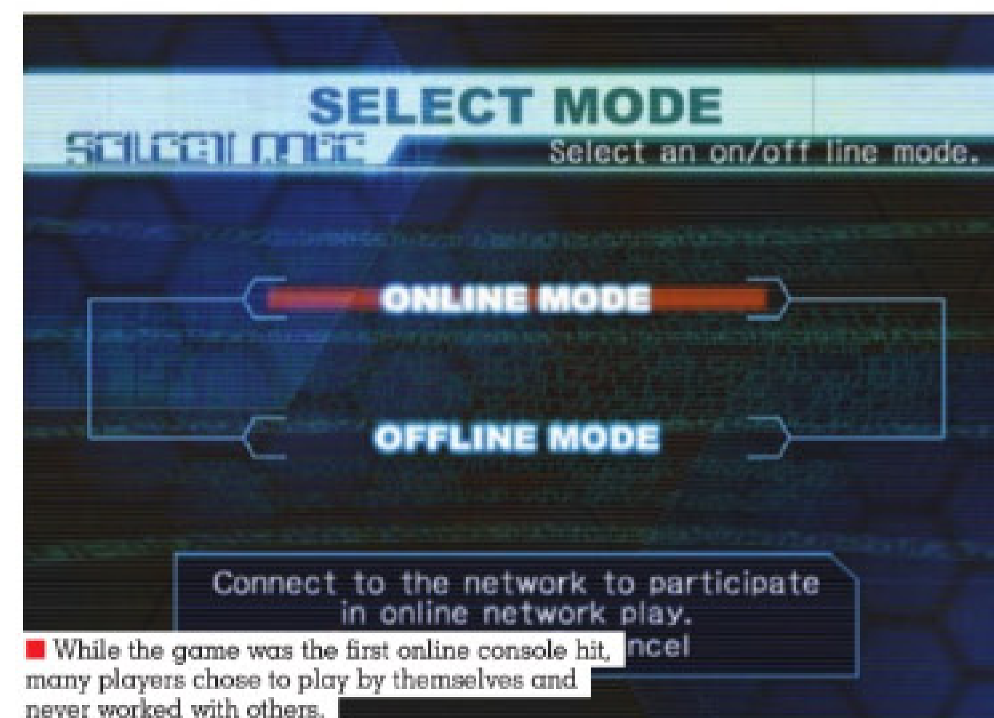
You can still play *PSO* today, even though Sega has stopped supporting it.











While the game was the first online console hit, many players chose to play by themselves and never worked with others.




Decking out and customizing your character was the main draw of *PSO*. There was always more loot to find.







FROM THE FORUM

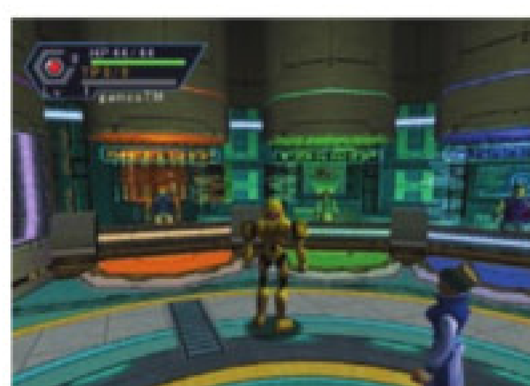
Posted by: THEVULTURE

Still have it in my DC collection. Even though I spent the entire time playing it in offline mode, I still managed to get hours out of it. Rich, vibrant visuals that Sega did so well, interesting enough story. Not kidding myself that I had a clue what I was doing with the Mag. I just fed it all sorts to see what would happen. As for the online side? What, on dial-up? With BT's prices? Pfff… Fat chance.

Posted by: RIVAONI

One of my absolute favourite games of all time. *Phantasy Star Online* was my *WOW*. It got me into online gaming properly, and I spent an unhealthy amount of time (and a ridiculous amount of my mother's money) playing online and off. I've played every single iteration across all formats and reached level 101 with my RAcast on Version 2 even though by that point I was using it as a glorified online chat room, so would never have reached level 200.

So many great moments, trying to find a name that would give me a good Section ID and ultimately a good drop rate, exchanging items, weapons and Mags in order to give my character the appearance I wanted it to have, and trying to avoid hackers at all cost to prevent having to restart yet another character.


PSO's lobbies doubled as chat rooms and eventually became more popular than the main quests.



interview, Sega was preparing to shut down the last servers for the original *Phantasy Star Online* – or *PSO: Blue Burst* as the PC version is now called – after years of expansion packs.

Sakai and Naka's involvement with the game's original incarnation ended years ago, and Sega is now a very different company than it was during its time as a hardware manufacturer. At that time, even before production work had begun on *PSO*, Naka's team was split into three after the completion of *Sonic Adventure*. One group focused solely on pushing the graphical capabilities of the Dreamcast to their limits, another looked into the possibility of an online game, and the third worked on various projects that would eventually lead to the creation of *Chu Chu Rocket*. "Everyone was spread out doing their own thing in the studio," says Naka. But, eventually, these three teams came together for *Phantasy Star Online*.

NOT THAT THEY had much choice. "Word came from the top that we had to make an online game," said Naka. At the time, Sega was headed by Isao Okawa, who declared that 2000 would be the year of the network game. Unfortunately, the teams were spread pretty thin at that point. "The *Sakura Wars* team had to keep making *Sakura Wars*, the *Jet Set Radio* team had to do *Jet Set Radio*. Everybody was hoping somebody else would do it." Despite the fact that Sonic Team wasn't the best fit for the project, Okawa gave the responsibility to Naka's team. Not everyone was thrilled, but as Naka put it, "Okawa had a clear vision of the future."


SATOSHI SAKAI
Designer/Art Director

There was just one issue: nobody knew what online gaming meant in 2000. While PC online gaming had been around for decades, and truly exploded in the mid-Nineties, the PC-free game culture of Japan had never shown much interest. Not only did the team have to create a new genre, it had to sell online gaming to a country of console gamers. It wasn't going to be an easy sell, given that the internet service providers in Japan charged a per-minute fee for dial-up, and broadband was almost unheard of at the time. According to Sakai, Okawa showed the courage of his convictions by bundling a year's worth of internet access free with each Dreamcast. In the end, it cost Sega nothing, because Okawa paid for it from his own pocket. Naka suggests that the chairman felt that strongly about it, it really was going to be the next big thing.

Naka knew he had to make an online game, but what did that mean? How do you play a game online? How do you communicate? How do you relay the story? What did the phrase 'online game' mean in 2000? "Cheap graphics," he replies. Stark and boring visuals were associated with online games at the time. "Even today, that's the case. That's why I had my graphics team and online team separate, but I decided to combine their skills into one game and have both graphics and online together." The combination would eventually prove to be nearly unstoppable, but that wasn't a forgone conclusion. If the game was to use all the power of the Dreamcast, he needed his art team behind him. That's where Sakai came in.

At the time, the game was simply called *Third World*. Though the team was aiming to create a sci-fi atmosphere, no one thought of associating it with the long-dormant *Phantasy Star* series, which hadn't seen a release since the Mega Drive era. According to Sakai, "I knew it would be 3D and it couldn't look cheap. I wanted to do sci-fi fantasy. That, with the freedom of online gameplay, worked together. It had a comic-like look to it at first, but we couldn't show off our realistic art like that. So we made it more realistic." When creating concept art for the game, Sakai drew a dragon and, when Naka saw the image, something clicked. *The Third World* became *Phantasy Star Online*.

A SIMPLE IDEA, a name, and some concept art don't form a game. Naka needed to figure out how the gameplay would work, and was in a position that very few game makers ever find themselves: he was doing something completely unlike what any of his peers had ever done. While Western gamers today often look at the online components that come out of Japanese games and infer that online-play isn't important in Japan, in 2000 it was non-existent. Naka had to look outside his own country for inspiration, something that, until quite recently, no Japanese game maker would ever do – or at least admit to. In 2000, there were really only three big names in online RPGs: *Ultima*, *Everquest*, and *Diablo*. And it was the latter loot-gathering classic that would serve as inspiration for *PSO*.


YUJI NAKA
Producer

Diablo had impressed Naka because the game surprised him on not just a gameplay level, but a technical one as well. "The biggest issue with online games was memory. They require a lot of it, and the graphics suffer as a result. I was impressed with how smooth the gameplay of *Diablo* was, but it was a 2D game. We wanted a game with Dreamcast graphics and the same level of gameplay as *Diablo*." It also helped that the main programmer on the game was an addict of Blizzard's loot-whoring masterpiece.

Ten years on, it's easy to look back and see the gameplay connections between *PSO* and *Diablo*, but very few critics pointed it out at the time. Part of the reason was the lack of overlap between the console-focused audience of *PSO*, and the PC game-focused *Diablo* audience. The graphics also played a role; *PSO* looked nothing like *Diablo* and the inspiration drawn from it was purely mechanical. *PSO*'s artistic direction came from somewhere else.

The freedom available to Sega teams during the Dreamcast era is hard to imagine in today's stricter, higher-stakes environment. Teams were left with little supervision, to create the kind of games they wanted to make. It produced some of the all-time classics of the console, including *Jet Set Radio*, *Space Channel 5* and *Phantasy Star Online*.

Sakai's art team was also free. Most of the staff from *Phantasy Star IV* had left Sega by the time *PSO* production was underway. With the sense that 3D was a new start for videogame CONTINUED >.

WHAT THEY SAID...



If you've never experienced online gaming, prepare to have your world rocked and your social life stripped away. Phantasy Star Online is dangerous, addictive, and the most engrossing RPG the Dreamcast has to offer

Game Informer, January 2001





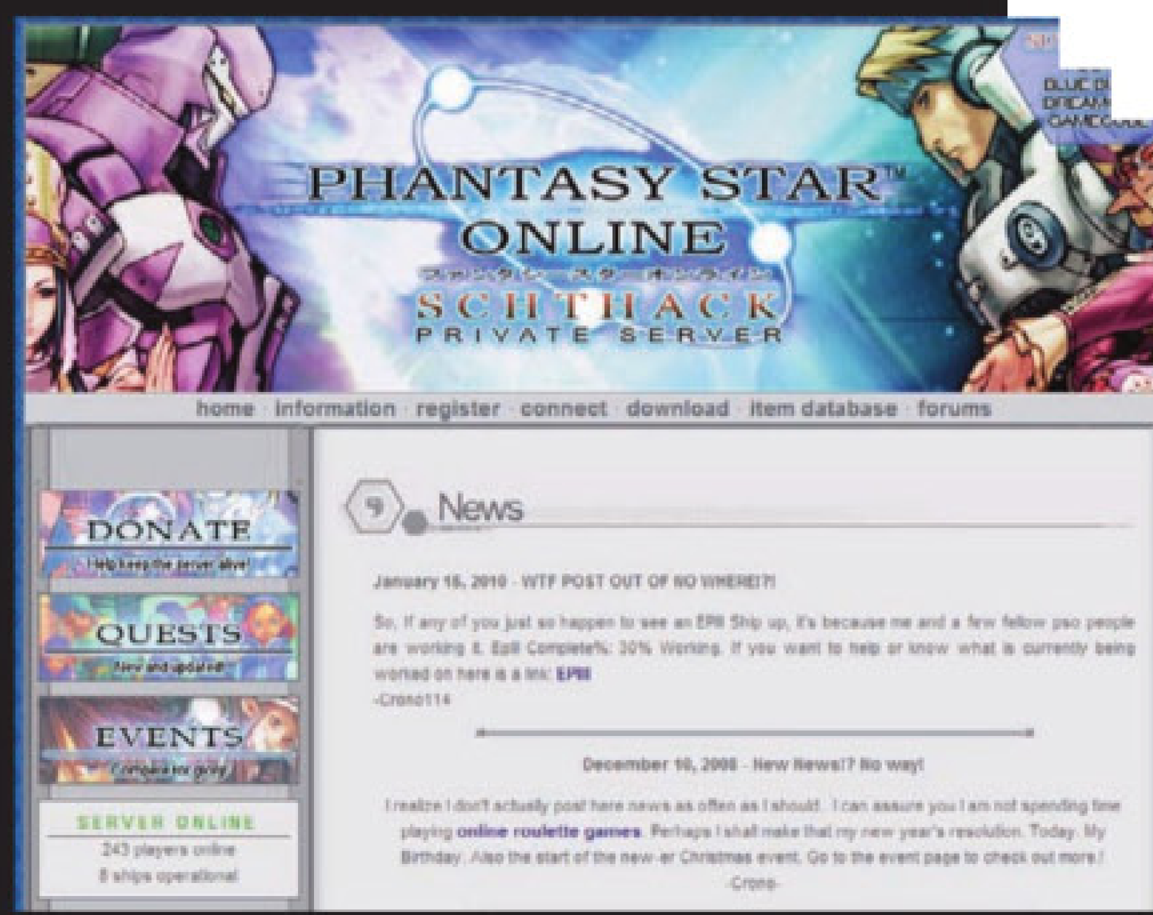
Though loved by online gamers, *PSO* drove a wedge through *Phantasy Star* fans who lamented the loss of the original single-player RPG series.

WE WANTED DREAMCAST GRAPHICS AND THE SAME LEVEL OF GAMEPLAY AS DIABLO

Stayin' Alive

Feeling nostalgic? Turns out, with PSO, you can go home again

Sega finally ended support for the Japanese version of *Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst* on 27 December 2010, after nearly ten years of continuous service. But fans outside of Japan faced exile from *PSO* much earlier, and came up with a workaround that should allow Japanese players (as well as anyone else) to continue enjoying the game. The most hardcore *Phantasy Star Online* devotees created unofficial servers to host their games, and even at this very moment, there are players around the world still playing *PSO* on their Dreamcasts, Gamecubes, and PCs. Want to give it a shot? Simply visit http:www.schtserv.com to check it out. While its online access isn't as user-friendly as it was in the old days, it's still just as fun.



Stone Age Internet

It's still better than BT was, right?

■ OKAWA'S DECISION to include a year of internet was a bold move, and absolutely necessary to ensure that players would continue to play the game; they simply didn't want to pay per-minute to play anything. Around the time of the game's release, Japanese phone company NTT unveiled an 'unlimited telephone' plan that allowed users unlimited internet from 11AM to 8PM for ¥1,800 yen a month (about £9 with the exchange rates of the time). Around the same time, workers at Sega noticed the servers were getting hammered at 11 o'clock almost every night. Naka wasn't happy about this and wanted to work with a different ISP, but since Okawa was footing the bill, the call was up to him. "We probably helped out NTT a lot."



art, the team felt little obligation to adhere to the style set down in the game's 16-bit predecessors. "*Phantasy Star* has changed from game to game with each title. *I* and *II* might have been similar, but the designers had a lot of freedom. We had only the fixed image of sci-fi RPG," says Sakai. What little influence that was apparent came in the name of enemy and item names. Naka and Sakai believed that too many things were different to allow more influence. The platform, graphics, even genre (action-RPG versus RPG, a distinction that's very clear to Naka) was different.

Sakai often mentions freedom within *PSO* itself. For him, everything came together in just the right way. The game had the right combination of setting, art, and gameplay, to give the player an unparalleled sense of freedom. Players were free to explore as they saw fit, and Sakai claims that the game's art and sci-fi fantasy setting only work to heighten this sensation. By the time production finished, the team felt that they had created something truly new and original. They were quite proud of it, but they had no way of knowing how the public would react. The free internet included with the game, thanks to Okawa, would certainly move sales in Japan, but they weren't all 100 per cent confident. Sega wasn't too concerned with sales abroad. At the time, Japanese publishers made games for Japan, and any sales on top of the domestic ones were just a bonus.

■■■ AS IT TURNED out, they needn't have worried; the game sold almost exactly as many units as Sega was expecting. Naka was actually a little disappointed by this: "To be honest, I wanted the game to sell a little more. But actually we sold as much as we could handle. After release, the server load was borderline. Any more and the game would have crashed." Naka's perfectionism comes out as he talks about the game's performance. Despite selling well and winning numerous awards, he still doesn't seem satisfied, even ten years on. "The team probably didn't have the right knowledge, because everything was new to them. There were provider problems as well. In Hiroshima and Okayama the network didn't work right and they had to investigate these new kinds of problems. It was stressful."

Naka's exacting expectations of himself aside, the game sold miraculously well in an era where 'console' meant offline gaming almost by definition, and the fan base that it created was perhaps the most fervent and rabid until *World Of Warcraft* came along. That, if nothing else, pleased and surprised Naka. "We on the development team were surprised. Originally, we aimed to offer twenty days of gameplay. So we gave the first month free. No one cared that the free trial was only a month; they kept on playing. Twenty days was





■ With only four stages in total, *PSO* could become a little dull but the levelling and random loot kept people playing, regardless.

> WE SOLD AS MUCH AS WE COULD HANDLE. THE SERVER LOAD WAS BORDERLINE

the target for one character. People made multiple characters and started over."

The game pleased critics as well. *PSO* took home 17 awards, including top honours at the Japanese Game Awards. Unfortunately, the game's chief champion Okawa didn't live to see the game win. While *PSO* was in production, Okawa was in poor health, and he was hospitalised by the time the game was released. Naka said, "I was making reports and sending pictures to the hospital, but Okawa was probably too sick to see them. Three days after he died, *PSO* won the Japan Game Award."

■■■ DESPITE ALL THE acclaim and the loss of their biggest supporter, the team received no break. They went to work maintaining the overworked *PSO* servers, while working a gruelling schedule that enabled them to release *Phantasy Star Online Version 2* in less than six months. Work on *PSO* never really stopped. The game was ported to the PC, GameCube, and Xbox. Even after those versions shut down (as well as the Dreamcast version), Sega was pouring work and resources into *PSO* until December of 2010, when it finally shut down the last servers for the final iteration on PC. On top of building up the original game, Sega expanded the franchise to include *Phantasy Star Portable* for the PSP, *Phantasy Star Zero* for DS, and the critically panned *Phantasy Star Universe* on Xbox 360 and PC.

The series has struggled to live up to the legacy of the original game. While Sega was busy trying to top *PSO*, Capcom stole its thunder by taking the formula and adapting it into *Monster Hunter*. For various cultural reasons, the ad hoc gameplay of *Monster Hunter* on PSP proved to be far more popular in Japan than online could ever hope to be. By the time Sega realised the right direction to take the series, it was too late and *Phantasy Star* was stuck playing catch-up to *Monster Hunter*. At the same time, the PSP *Phantasy Star* games have failed to capture the attention of the West, and Sega is incredibly slow to localise and release them. It seems that only the hardcore fans, who created their own private *PSO* servers after the game was shut down, are keeping the series alive.

Now no longer working at Sega and heading his own studio at Prope – currently working on *Rodea The Sky Soldier* and *Family Fishing* for Wii – Naka doesn't seem to mind the series' fortunes, as long as the game's fans remember what he achieved. "As the game creator, *Diablo* influenced us and we wanted to create something better. I'm happy to see others take what we did and work with it. I'm the kind of creator who wants to do something first. If I do something and others follow, I'm happy. If there was no *PSO*, *Monster Hunter* wouldn't have come out. I feel I'm lucky. You have to be there in the right place at the right time. For the younger generation it's difficult, there's so much out there already. I was lucky to have the chance to do that first."

■ Loot was the real heart of the game. From boxed items to enemy drops, there was always a better piece of kit to get.





■ Rag Rappys were the Slimes of *Phantasy Star Online* – cute, unchallenging foes that were later mined for merchandise.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Often imitated, never surpassed (except perhaps by *Phantasy Star Online*), *Diablo* singlehandedly gave rise to the entire 'loot-whoring' genre.



Designer Hiroshi Matsuyama cited *Phantasy Star Online* as a direct influence on his ambitious single-player PS2 MMO series, *.hack*.



STRIKING: OUT

Commercial videogames were unafraid to pass comment on the socio-economic situations affecting Britain in the 1980s. But why was the culture among developers so different back then and are we likely to see contemporary videogames react in the same way?

BRITAIN IN THE Eighties was a place of great social and economic change. Dominated by the Conservative politics of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, there were fervent moves to reduce the level of state intervention in the lives of the general public. On the one hand there was an air of buoyancy, with two Royal Weddings and the successful defence of the Falklands, and on the other utter despair and anger, encapsulated by the Miners' Strike and the loss of industries that were once key to the North of England. Sound familiar?

Yuppies, chunky mobile phones, cheesy pop, big hair and the rapid emergence of videogames were therefore only a part of what made this decade so memorable. And while television tried to make sense – and jokes – of this most tumultuous of periods with programmes such as *Yes Minister* and *Spitting Image*, games were also unafraid to process the socio-economic situation of Eighties Britain in its own way. The bedroom coders of the day would sometimes infuse adult themes into their games and comment on real life without fear of damaging sales.

Today, the trend is for games to recreate the world in fictional terms. *Grand Theft Auto* is a great example of a game that is culturally relevant and bold. Art historian Soraya Murray observes CJ's underserved inner-city area in *San Andreas* with its burger, fried-chicken and pizza joints as a subtle critique of American society. Ammu-Nation's store bellows the slogan 'for all your daily firearm needs', a parody on the prevalence of guns in the US. But this is set in a fictional city.

Social commentary today is hidden behind walls of irony, obscured by fantasy settings and, more worryingly, is focused on American or global issues, with virtually zero videogames processing situations closer to home. In the 1980s, things were very different, particularly in the UK. Games were more likely to reference the humdrum of reality than they are today.

THE COST OF FAILURE WAS LOW ENOUGH THAT SOME RISKS WERE ACCEPTABLE

More obviously, there was a greater leaning towards exploring working class culture, mimicking classic British film in many ways. British movies have a reputation for being gritty and unafraid of processing the socio-economic situation of their time, whether that be with classic dramas such as *Kes* or later productions like *Brassed Off*, and it was once the case that gaming would also sometimes reflect the ins and outs of ordinary lives.

Take Malcolm Evans' game about binmen in 1984 called *Trashman*, which was so popular it spawned a sequel. Players worked their way through seven streets, emptying bins into a slow-moving cart. That was not all, however; your binman could do favours for neighbours, which showed them as a vital and integral part in the community while highlighting a job which may, on face value, seem rather unusual, perhaps even dull, gaming fodder.

Consider too, *Everyone's A Wally*, the main character of which was a builder whose friends numbered an electrician, plumber and mechanic (who may, or may not, have been better with cars than Harry in 1984's text adventure, *Mechanic Harry*). Mopping up the working class list of characters was *Colin The Cleaner* (a game by Tynesoft)...

Would American and Japanese developers attempt to use such everyday characters in their games? Sure, the Japanese have produced games continued>.

about plumbers, but not without including special powers, princesses to rescue and an abundance of magic mushrooms. And *Night Shift* was an interesting game based in a factory, albeit one that produced *Star Wars* figures. Both barely register on the scale of social commentary. But developers in the UK appeared unafraid to make reference to real life in the 8-bit home computer era, and put their own slant on proceedings. The graphics may have been a world apart from reality but the themes were sometimes much closer.

■ Jon Hare

UK developers had no issue with making games about something as inherently working class as mining. The dangers of the job were starkly shown even in *Manic Miner*, in which gamers had to guide Willy through a frustrating series of underground caverns to the surface with oxygen levels depleting. Created by Matthew Smith, who was based in a Merseyside racked with high unemployment, it was interesting that a miner was a central character given the impact of the closure of coal mines and other heavy industry, and it showed a sensitivity to the working man. Also intriguing is the way *Jet Set Willy* commented on the social and economic change taking place during the 1980s. This sequel saw the central character living the high life offered by the lucrative spoils of his earlier adventure, and fitted in well with the emerging yuppie, Loadsamoney ethos.

That the game was developed on that most British of home computers, the Spectrum, was no accident. It was a hub of creativity due to the ease in which games could be made. The economic climate of the country with its haves and have-nots was more apparent than ever before and it prompted some programmers to base games on what they knew and saw around them. The ease with which coders had access to development and publishing on these shores in comparison to America and Japan also allowed for a far greater diversity of socio-economic themes.

The *Monty* series of games also referenced miners, but was more direct in its commentary on industrial unrest at the time. The games, created by Peter Harrap, featured union leader Arthur Scargill, flying pickets and a mole. The first in the series, *Wanted: Monty Mole*, was trendily topical, and drew inspiration from Harrap's father's job as a mine training officer. Although it started with the idea of a platform game starring a mole, the miners' strike kicked off in 1984 and Harrap decided to tap into the strong feelings of the time by introducing flying pickets. Before long, it evolved into a social commentary that was absurdly *Monty Python* in nature.

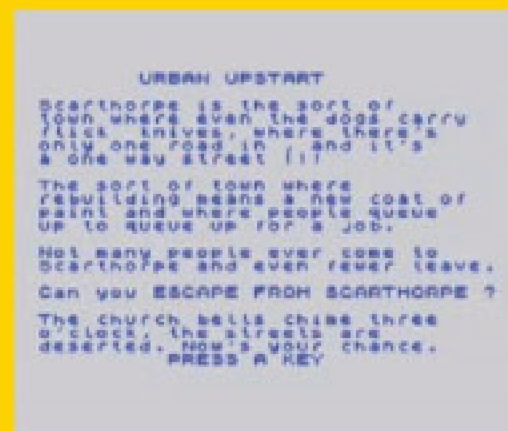
In the game, Monty was breaking picket lines to obtain coal from a fictional mine that was held in secret by Scargill, who incidentally appeared as a grotesque caricature on the loading screen. The game appeared to poke fun at Scargill, the then-president of the National Union Of Mineworkers, depicting him with a large nose and thinning hair. The final screen showed 'King Arthur' sitting on his throne, and flying pickets were seen as the enemy. As for Monty Mole, he had to battle through such annoyances to beat Arthur in his castle. The secret ballot papers could then be collected, but Monty had to put up with Arthur's personal bodyguards first.

■■■ IN THE SEQUEL, *Monty On The Run*, the main character was imprisoned and players had to help him escape in what was a two-fingered gesture to the authorities and a commentary on the social impact of the police tactics within Britain at that time. The important thing to remember is that the gung-ho approach and freedom of publishing in the 1980s meant that Gremlin actually dared to approach such a contentious real-life issue, whereas today major publishers would shy away from a similar social and political plunge.

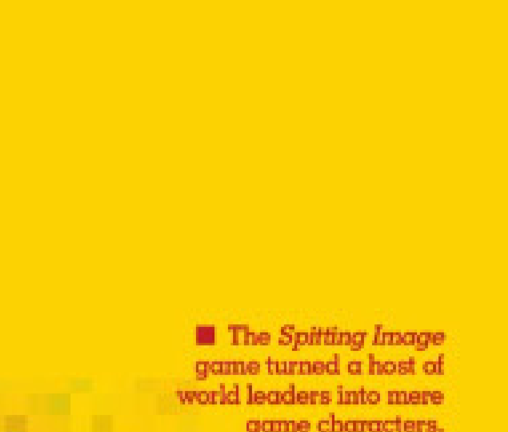




■ *Cannon Fodder* became a commentary on the nature of war almost by accident, but it worked very well.



■ Scarthorpe was ugly by name and uglier by nature in *Urban Upstart*. In this town 'even the dogs carry flick knives.'



■ The *Spitting Image* game turned a host of world leaders into mere game characters.

War Games

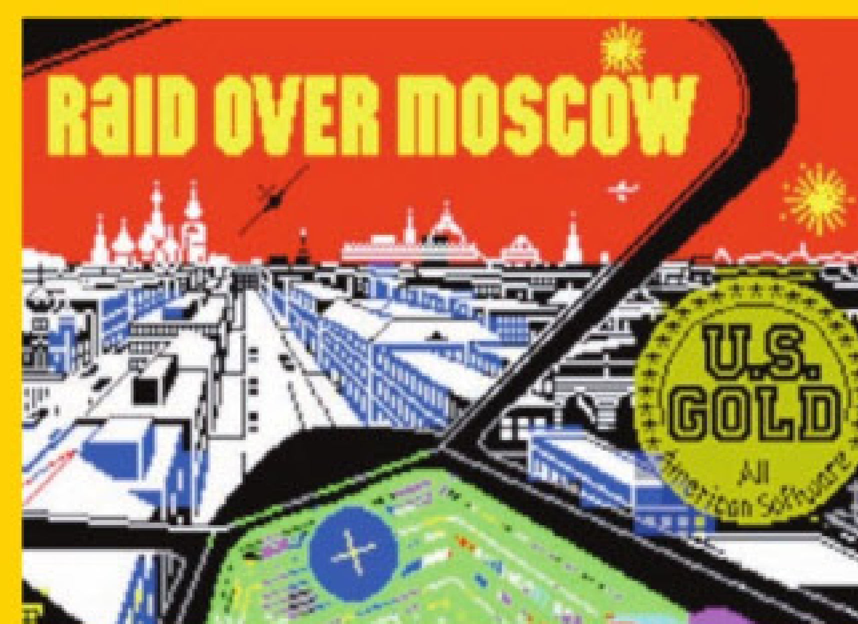
■ THE COMBINATION OF experimental, accidental and conscious moves to emphasise the dark side of war in *Cannon Fodder* left the game's programmers with a powerful title. It is perhaps remembered starkly for the ironic lyrics of its theme tune 'War has never been so much fun', the key words of which are 'Go up to your brother, kill him with your gun'.

It is a bit like the antithesis of the popular music hall song 'Two Little Boys', and prompts the player to ask whether it would be right to shoot someone, who could well have been your brother if you had been born in a different place, without considering his humanity.

"The answer is, of course, that it is right if he and his mates are about to shoot you or your loved ones," says Hare. "But where does it stop? Why do so many people need to die before we decide to call it a day?"

The game included a list of named dead soldiers at the end of each level, some of whom you grew to care about deeply and a lot of others, mostly privates, whose passing you didn't even notice in the heat of battle, their only reward being their name scrolling by for five seconds, a 16-pixel grave stone and an increment of one in the Away column.

"This was an echo of the names we now see engraved on War Memorials all over Great Britain and across much of Europe, in memory of all of the people who died in the two great wars of the last century," says Hare.



"I think in general, games and the creators of games were bound to incorporate many elements of the culture they are created within, as with any media," says Phil Carlisle, a lecturer in games at the University of Bolton. "In the Eighties, programmers were very much experimenting with what games could be and it was largely made up of individuals rather than huge teams. The cost of making a game was smaller and you could experiment with many different themes, each one being acceptable if it was new or interesting. The cost of failure was low enough that some risks were acceptable and it meant games that drew on the social and economic experience of programmers could be made."

■■■ A GOOD EXAMPLE of this is *Urban Upstart*. A Spectrum and Commodore 64 text adventure, the game was set in a fictional British town called Scarthorpe. It was an ugly-sounding suburban dive rocked by unemployment and a high crime rate. At 3am, the main character decides to flee this demoralising mess, and that's where the player comes in. In typifying a poverty-stricken inner city area of the time, it included football hooligans, highlighted the eagle-eye nature of a police force being kept on its toes and encapsulated a feeling of helplessness in that the only way to turn lives around would be to abandon the area and leave it to rot in its own attendant problems.

And yet the reviews at the time failed to get to grips with this message, highlighting the naivety of gaming journalists, who were mostly recruited straight out of school or even younger at the time. By concentrating on the gameplay of *Urban Upstart*, most reviewers seemed not to credit the creators of the game with pursuing either an overt or covert agenda.

It was seen from a perspective of gameplay and a product intended to make money. There was no discussion over any motive or purpose beyond that; games were either viewed for the personal effect they had or condemned for being evil or reprehensible, and some would argue the same is true today in many quarters – there is certainly more interest in the business side of gaming among mainstream journalists than there is in the business side of film, for example. If games today cannot hold similar messages, then it may be less to do with commercial sensibilities and more with a limited public acceptance of games as a catalyst for social commentary due to the lack of criticism toward them.

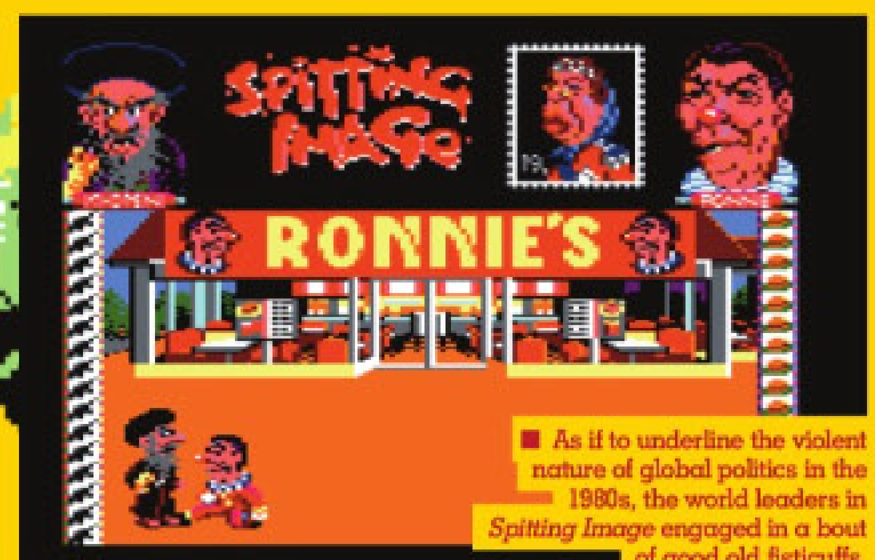


■ David J Anderson

But this didn't deter developers from making such games. In Britain, publishers showed a real appetite for new software, and would leap on even the most obscure of themes, quickly duplicating tapes and rushing them into the shops. In America and Japan by contrast, there was a greater uptake of consoles (although the Commodore 64 was a top US seller) and the cost of duplicating games on cartridge and the laborious process of producing them meant it was harder to get a game published and publishers were less likely to take a risk.

IN THE EIGHTIES, PROGRAMMERS WERE EXPERIMENTING WITH WHAT GAMES COULD BE

Rather than centre games around mundane domestic issues, America and Japan would concentrate on wider, global problems. The 1980s game *Raid Over Moscow* was written in America by Access Software and brought to Britain by Birmingham publisher U.S. Gold, tapping into the paranoia of the Cold War, which was very much in full swing at the time. Players assumed the role of a US space pilot bidding to prevent a hat-trick of Soviet attacks on America before going to Moscow to destroy the city's continued>.



■ As if to underline the violent nature of global politics in the 1980s, the world leaders in *Spitting Image* engaged in a bout of good old fisticuffs.





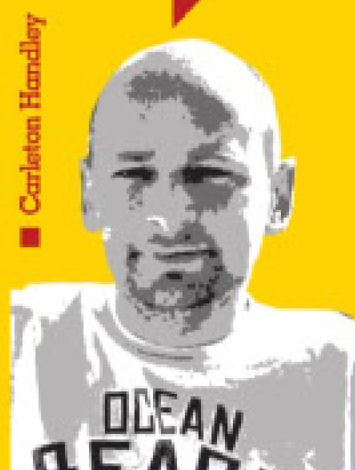
■ Monty is killed by a Miner in *Wanted: Monty Mole.*

nuclear facility. The game's validity was widely questioned – after all, the USSR was the enemy and here was a game advocating an attack – and it even went as far as a left-leaning politician in the Finnish parliament debating whether the game should even be sold.

The creators of *Raid Over Moscow* doubt that the game would have been written in Britain. Indeed, programmer David J Anderson says he was told by managers that such a subject would be taboo in the UK where there was a real fear of the Soviet Union. "It was explained to me that Bruce Carver [the coder who came up with the idea for the game] was from a part of America where they'd been programmed by the government to fear and hate the USSR and communism," he says. "They said they were sufficiently remote from it all that they really had no fear of invasion."

He adds: "It was a social commentary on the times, but it reflected on the US and not Europe or the UK in terms of the origination of the game. But I think people bought it because they could see it as a game and fantasy fun. Of course, Eighties games were not realistic like today's games. Blowing up the Kremlin in *Raid Over Moscow* could not be related to violence in that sense."

MOST POLITICAL GAMES WERE PROBABLY NAIVE AT BEST. THE POINT IS THEY WERE BEING MADE



■ Carleton Handley

Raid Over Moscow was not an isolated case. *Hijack*, made in 1986, explored terrorism. *Wasteland*, from 1988, was the first true post-apocalyptic RPG, commenting on the state of humanity. *M.U.L.E.* arguably displayed a model of capitalism where becoming rich invariably led to a colony being largely destroyed as a social unit. And there were titles like Sid Meier's first war game, *NATO Commander*, in which players controlled Western European armies against the Soviet-controlled East, and were encouraged to think politically about the Cold War gripping the world at the time of its release in 1984.

If UK developers did touch global politics, it was almost always with humour. The game *Spitting Image* was a version of the popular ITV late-night puppet-led satirical show. It was released at the tail end of the decade in 1989, and it referenced Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Pope John Paul II, Ayatollah Khomeini and PW Botha. But instead of making a bold statement, it merely involved them in a beat-'em-up under the watchful eye of The Queen.

"Most political games were probably naive at best, but the point is that some were being made," says the game's coder, Carleton Handley. "Games back then were considered to be for kids, and were written by people not much older than the kids they were aimed at. So they weren't always massively sophisticated. There was a game based on Charles' and Di's baby called *Di's Baby*. That was the sort of thing we got."

Even in the early 1990s, however, there were solid examples of programmers being unafraid to assume a stance but, as in the USA, domestic issues were taking a back seat to the global. Sensible Software's *Cannon Fodder* ended up being a social comment on war and came in the wake of the Gulf War when conflict was at the forefront of everyone's minds. But that game actually started life very differently.

According to creator Jon Hare, it was originally intended to be an experimental system to control a chain of characters drawing initial inspiration from *Gauntlet* and the old *Rambo* game by Ocean Software. "But once the controls were established, we started to add the basic weapons and then basic enemies and basic background elements until a clear Vietnam era war game started to emerge," he says.

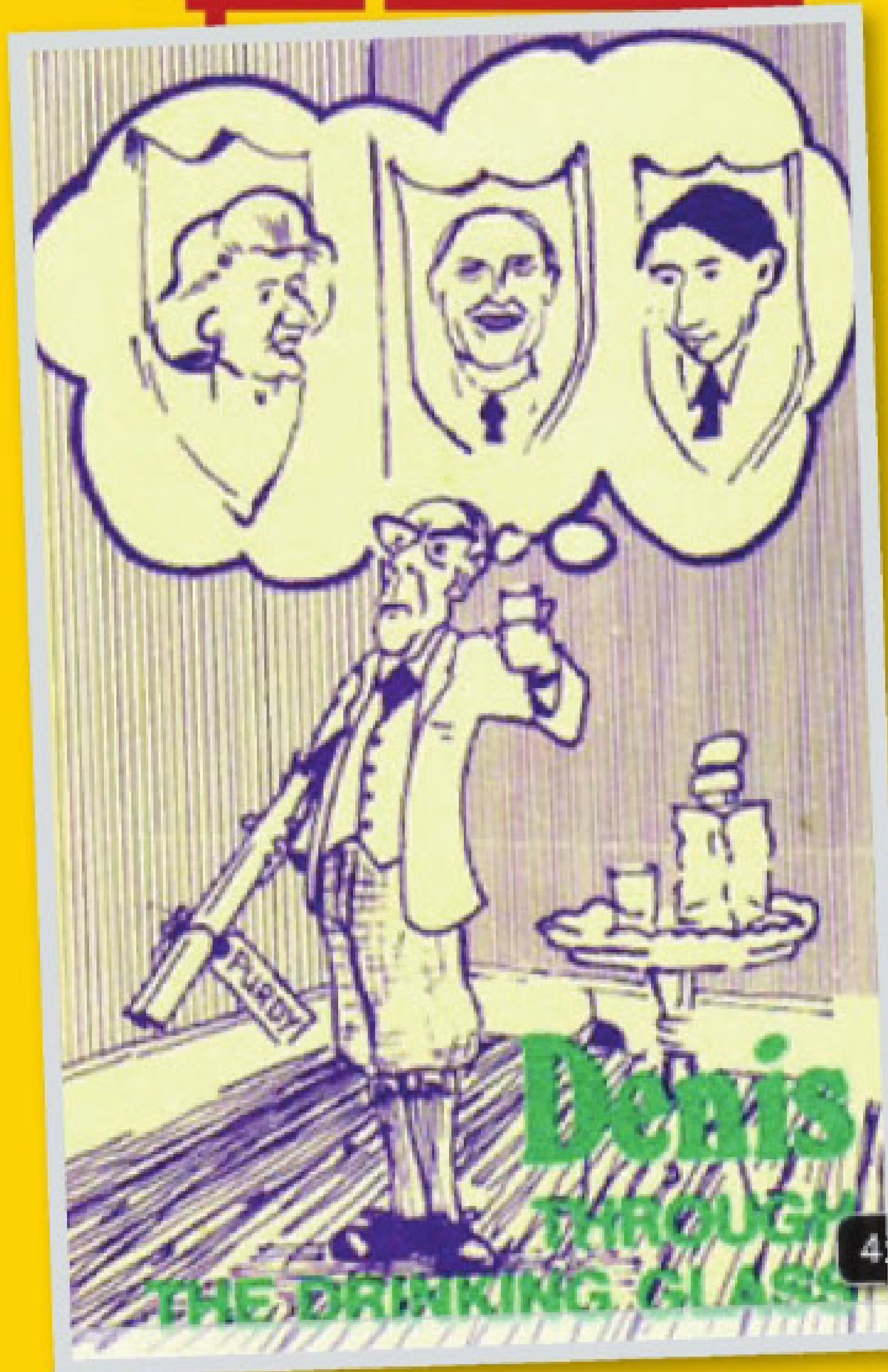
It was only at this point that Sensible Software started to even consider social commentary elements such as the gravestones on the hill, which initially emerged, together with the Home and Away score, as something to fill the screen. "We quickly decided to make the graves bigger depending upon the grade of the dead soldier, in true gaming fashion. Next came the naming of the soldiers to try to individualise them, after that came the awarding of grades at the end of every mission, and only then finally came the list of all the dead soldiers, which initially was little more than an afterthought to tack onto the end of the medal ceremony. Only at this stage did we realise we had a compelling social commentary, which we consciously reinforced by forcing the player to watch all the dead names scroll up before he could click to move on to the next level."

With games now played by millions of people young and old, it remains a natural medium through which society can start to address some really difficult domestic issues. But on a commercial level there is no easy, resistance-free route to market for such games. The attitude of objectively cutting straight to the chase irrespective of who we might offend in order to get across a message is likely to hit problems on almost every level.

Whether that will alter given the current heightened socioeconomic situation where cuts and conflicts combine, to push people into action and into wanting a say, really does remain to be seen. Commercially, however, we may have already seen the birth and death of mainstream commentary games, and if that is the case then we're much the poorer for it.

The Iron Lady

■ MARGARET THATCHER MAY have been one of the most powerful and influential prime ministers Britain has ever had, but she wasn't the most popular. And in videogames she was an easy target, to the point where satire and libel trod a fine line. The text adventure *Denis Through The Drinking Glass* poked fun at Thatcher's husband. Denis had to escape from his wife, fuelling his journey with copious amounts of alcohol. *Damocles*, which was the second *Mercenary* game, also included references to Thatcher. The president of the planet Eris was named Margaret. Additionally, there is a bank called Lawson Bank (named after the British chancellor from 1983 to 1989, Nigel Lawson). Thatcher was a frequent character in games, often represented as a tyrant. Subsequent PMs John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron must feel rather left out.

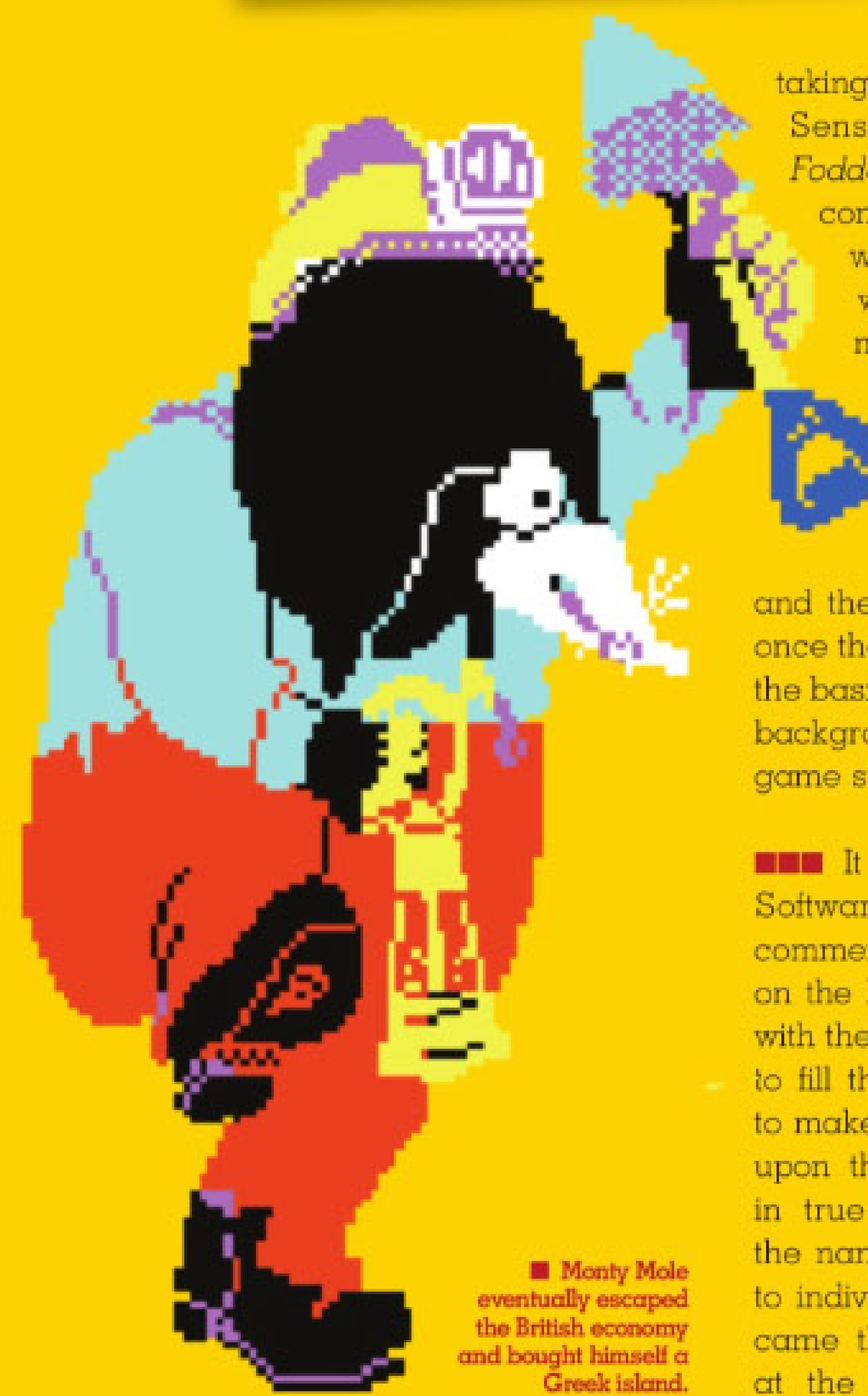


■ *Denis Through the Drinking Glass* took a swipe at the husband of Margaret Thatcher.



■ *Raid Over Moscow* was so controversial it was renamed *Raid*, showing that publishers even then were politically sensitive.





■ Monty Mole eventually escaped the British economy and bought himself a Greek island.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to the rarest retro treasures



CHASE THE CHUCK WAGON

DETAILS
Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1983
Publisher: Ralston Purina
Developer: Spectravision
Expect to pay: £50-£100

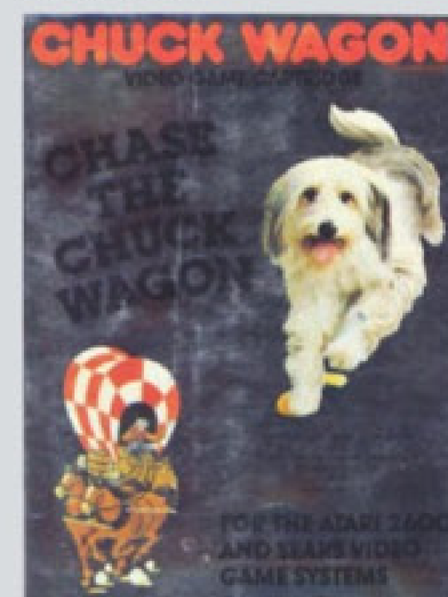


EXHIBIT A: The box has a foil finish that scuffs easily. Finding a pristine copy will be tricky.

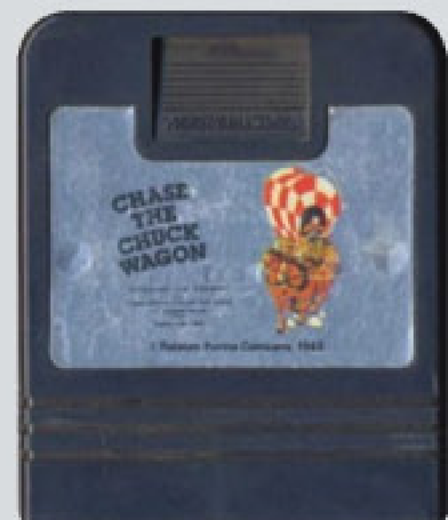


EXHIBIT B: The cartridge is the easiest part to find but you'll struggle to locate a manual.

Why It's Rare

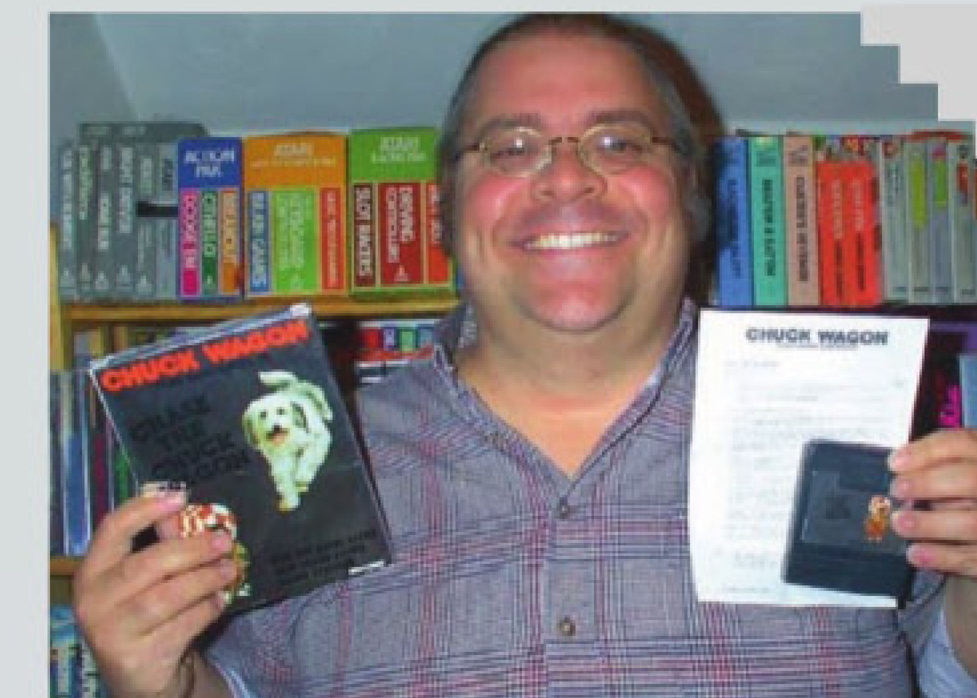
THE INFAMOUS *Chase The Chuck Wagon* has the dubious honour of being one of the earliest games made to promote a product outside the world of videogames. Thought up by American company Ralston Purina, it was designed to promote Chuck Wagon dog food and was given away free to those who saved vouchers from the food's packaging. Unfortunately for Ralston Purina, dog food wasn't something that many children of the Eighties bothered to buy and few parents paid the packaging enough attention to even realise they could earn a free game. Consequently, very few copies of the cartridge were ever sent out of the Ralston Purina warehouse and those that remained were destroyed some time around the late-Eighties. Over two decades later, the game has become one of the most well-known collectables in Atari history, and though it is by no means the rarest it still commands high prices because of its infamy. It is now so synonymous with videogame collecting that the phrase 'chasing the chuck wagon' has actually become a metaphor for hunting down any rare game, and there is even a retro-game auction site that goes by the same name.



Worth Playing?

JUST AS *Chase The Chuck Wagon*'s status as the rarest game on VCS is far from true, its reputation as one of the least playable has also been blown out of proportion. It's a poor game, sure, but it is by no means the worst. Though the title suggests some sort of 'chase', the titular Chuck Wagon is actually stationary throughout the game and, as Chuckie the dog-food mascot, you must run through a maze to reach the wagon. Like its obvious influence, *Pac-Man*, there are some obstacles in the maze. One is a life-removing dogcatcher and the other is a bouncing object that temporarily freezes Chuckie if they collide. Fail to reach the wagon within the time limit and Chuckie will inexplicably explode.

Though *Chase The Chuck Wagon* starts as a fairly decent score-attack maze game, it eventually becomes unplayable. As the levels progress, the bouncing object becomes so fast, and its freezing powers so potent that it can freeze Chuckie on the spot then bounce back and freeze him again before the first has worn off. Chuckie is left helpless as you watch the timer slowly count to zero and start to wish you hadn't spent a week's wages on the game.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Stefan Hall**
Occupation: **Professor of Media Studies**

Why collect Atari games and what drew you to Chase The Chuck Wagon in particular?
I got back into Atari in 1993, when I was taking a cross-country trip in my car. Somewhere out in Kansas I stopped off at a garage sale and found a 2600 complete in the box and remembered how much fun the games were. I still had my old cartridges in a drawer, so I decided to start assembling a collection. A year later, the internet was starting to come together as a communication tool, and I found several newsgroups devoted to collecting. That's when I heard about *Chase The Chuck Wagon* and its legendary status.

Tell us how you found the game.
I had several opportunities to purchase the loose cartridge, but held out for a boxed copy. In summer 2005, I noticed one in an eBay lot with an Atari 2600 and 13 other titles. I actually wasn't the high bidder, but the winner wound up backing out and the seller sent me the second chance offer, so I snapped it up.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
The cartridge and box were in fantastic condition – no imperfections, the metallic label and box were bright and shiny – it looked practically unused. The instruction sheet, however, was missing, but I was patient and a year or so later I acquired a collection of manuals that included the missing instructions, and thus a complete copy was finally created. Factoring in the costs of buying and reselling what I didn't need in both cases, I probably wound up paying about $150.

Do you actually play the game?
A number of people don't think much of the game, so maybe my expectations were low, but considering it was a promotion for dog food, I thought that it wasn't as bad as the collecting community had made out. It isn't particularly strong and it is geared more toward children, but it has a certain charm.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game?
It's definitely not for sale. Perhaps when I am old and grey, I'd consider donating it to a videogame museum, but hopefully any offspring I have will grow to care for Atari as much as I do and keep it in the family.

If you'd like **games™** to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner then email us at **retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk**



Been There Played That

Are today's innovations really as new as their creators would have you believe?

Join us as we unearth the retro artefacts that prove them wrong

IT'S AN INEVITABLE fact of life that, once you get to a certain age, all tired and jaded, you'll begin to feel like you've seen it all before. For years, this was a fact that just didn't apply to the youthful videogame medium, but as the dawn of the digital age slips further into the past, those who were there from the beginning are starting to develop a perfectly natural level of cynicism.

As each generation comes and goes, we start to see the same patterns repeating. Take the way in which dominant platform holders repeatedly allow their growing arrogance to eventually topple their own empire and leave room for a competitor to take the throne. It happened very early on with Atari, then later with Nintendo. And for those of us who were paying close attention, it came as no surprise to see Sony usurped at the start of the current hardware generation.

The benefit of such an active memory, of course, is that we also don't fall for the hype as much as the younger generations. Whenever a new piece of hardware or a software innovation is announced, it can be very smart to stop and think about whether that something is actually as fresh an idea as we're led to believe. Close analysis of what has gone before can provide us with insight into whether an evolution of that idea may now work as intended and can even enable us to be more critical of what we receive, if it happens to fall short of the standards set by forgotten predecessors.

So, at the risk of coming across like grumpy old men, we've gathered together some of this generation's 'greatest' innovations and, well, picked on them a little bit. For each one we can point to another time in history when the same basic idea was accomplished. We're not going to be revisionist about it, however. Getting there first doesn't always make the idea the best of its time, so if an early innovation failed then we won't be shy about explaining why. Equally, however, if a modern innovation proves to be nothing more than a dressed-up rehash of something done well but since forgotten, then we'll give it as much grumpy ranting as it deserves. We are getting quite old now, after all.

THE BALANCE BOARD



LONG BEFORE Nintendo invaded the living room with its interactive bathroom scales, another company tried, but failed, to do a very similar thing. That company, believe it or not, was Amiga. Years before it was bought by Commodore, the computer designers were funding development of the Amiga 1000 by creating software for the Atari 2600. Three games were designed in total, and all were compatible with a custom controller known as the Joyboard.

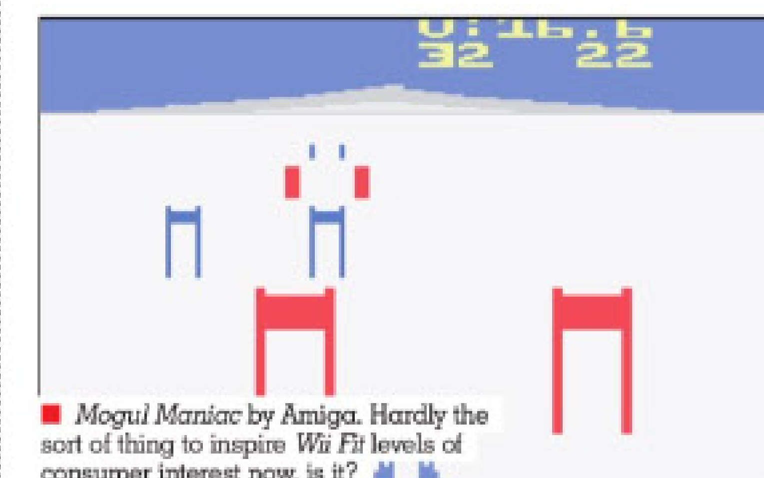


Functioning just like a simplified version of Nintendo's *Wii Fit* accessory, Amiga's Joyboard was a slab of plastic you stood upon and leaned from side to side in order to exert some sort of control over the on-screen action. Bundled with a skiing game called *Mogul Maniac*, the Joyboard was used rather well to simulate the slalom event, in a rare use of the first-person perspective on 2600. A lacklustre surfing game, called *Surf's Up*, followed as well as a leaning-controlled interpretation of Milton Bradley's *Simon*, rather ironically titled *Off Your Rocker*.

Sadly (or thankfully) Amiga ran into financial difficulties in 1983, and neither *Surf's Up* nor *Off Your Rocker* went into mass production. Even if they had been widely released, however, it's not difficult to see that the Joyboard would never have been an enormous success…

There is a little epilogue to the Joyboard story, however. In 2009, indie developer Ian Bogost created a new homebrew game for Amiga's historical footnote. Titled in reference to an Amiga computer system error message, *Guru Meditation* challenged you to sit as perfectly still as possible in order to make an on-screen yogi achieve a state of zen and levitate into the air. And though it was also made for iPhone's motion sensor, we'd love to see *Guru Meditation* come full circle as a Balance Board-compatible WiiWare game.





Mogul Maniac by Amiga. Hardly the sort of thing to inspire *Wii Fit* levels of consumer interest now, is it?

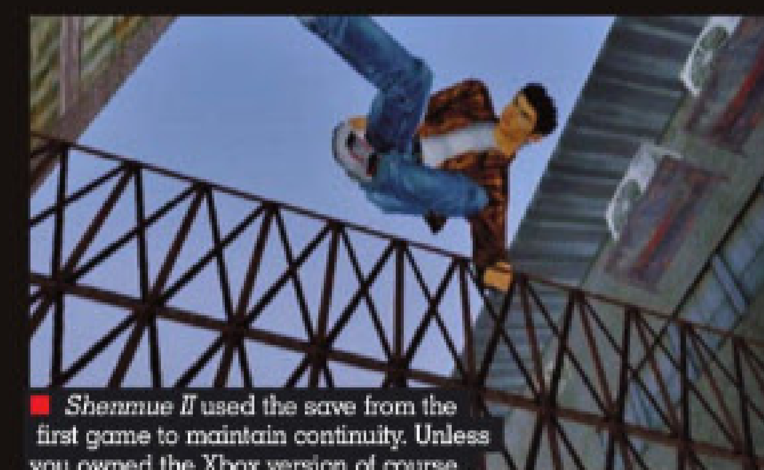
PERSISTENT SAVES



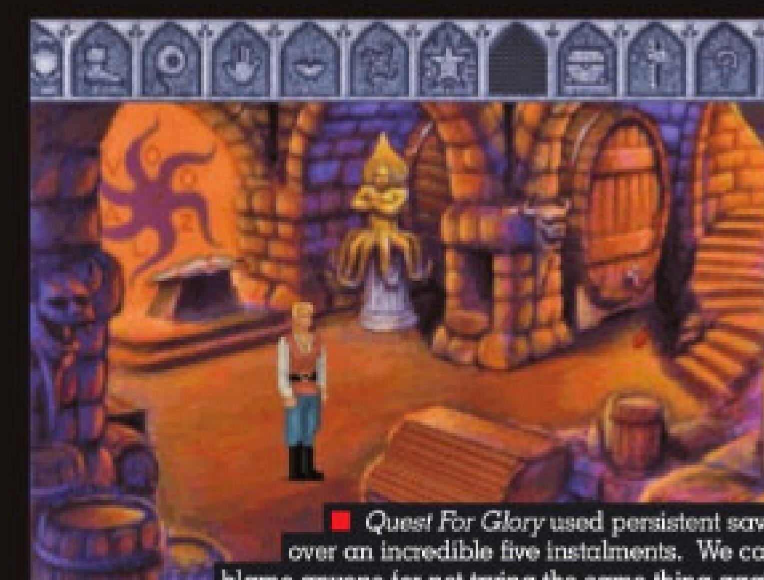
HOW MUCH praise has BioWare received for allowing you to carry your saved game from *Mass Effect 1* to *2*? A little too much, you might argue, considering that plenty of other games have all done the same thing. As detailed last issue, *Wizardry* was the first RPG to retain a sense of cause-and-effect over a number of games, and was a huge influence on Sierra's *Quest For Glory* series. The latter even allowed you to carry over every little detail of your main character and continue to expand upon him as the sequels rolled by – which is something that *Mass Effect 2* shamefully neglects to do, despite being released two decades after the first *Quest For Glory* sequel.

There are plenty of other examples, of course. *Shenmue II* allowed you to carry over a save that retained all the abilities Ryo had learned, as well as the various knick knacks he had acquired in the first game. Another Sega game, *Shining Force III*, saw you play a different army in each of its three separately-released chapters, with transferred saves enabling all manner of interesting effects. With the chapters showing a war from three different perspectives, the transferred saves allowed the player to see how choices they made in one game would affect characters in the sequels including, but not limited to, which soldiers could be recruited into the squad and what treasure did or did not appear in some towns. Most importantly, the final chapter forced you to play against squads you had developed in the previous discs, so if you'd done a good job of building up the first force then you'd only make the game harder for yourself in the end.

Many of the examples you see here are of ideas that have since been bettered, but in the case of persistent saves, there's a wealth of great ideas hidden away in the past. We love BioWare, but it's clear there are many more ways the developer can take advantage of persistent saves.



Shenmue II used the save from the first game to maintain continuity. Unless you owned the Xbox version of course.



Quest For Glory used persistent saves over an incredible five instalments. We can't blame anyone for not trying the same thing again.

TOUCH SCREEN

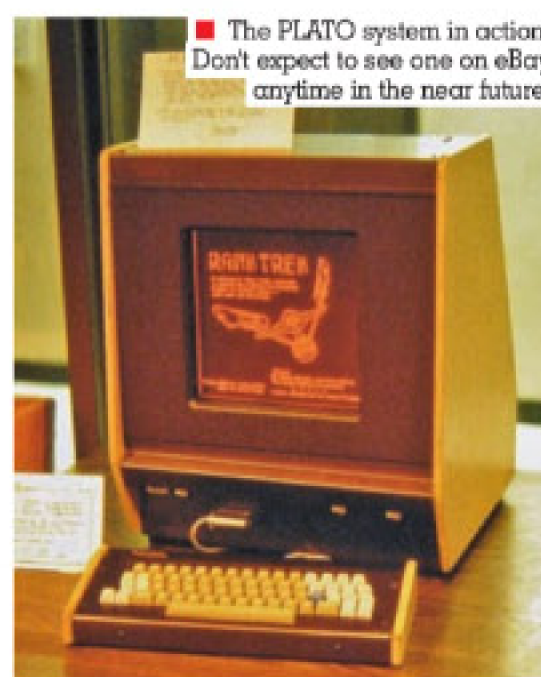
JUST ABOUT all new Nintendo hardware is, these days, designed according to Gunpei Yokoi's philosophy on 'Lateral Thinking of Withered Technology'. The original Game Boy designer believed that the re-use of old, proven technology was the best way to create something fun rather than allowing new inventions to over-complicate and encumber the purity of the design process. This theory applies as equally to the DS's touch screen as it did to Game Boy's blurry monochrome display nearly twenty years earlier.

Touch screen technology was first invented in the mid-Sixties and was put into commercial use as early as 1983, so it shouldn't surprise anyone to learn that videogames were using the same tech long before DS's 2004 debut. The PLATO system – one of the first general use computers – featured a series of infra-red lights around the perimeter of its screen in order to detect the position of the user's finger, and supported a number of early computer games. Just a few years later, MB's Vectrex used a 'light pen' to do essentially the same thing, enabling the player to directly interact with on-screen objects.

The most noteworthy predecessor to the DS, however, was the Tiger game.com, a 1997 handheld games system that tried and failed to take a slice of the Game Boy's market. The game.com was the first handheld to feature a touch screen but, if we're being honest, it wasn't a patch on the one inside the DS.

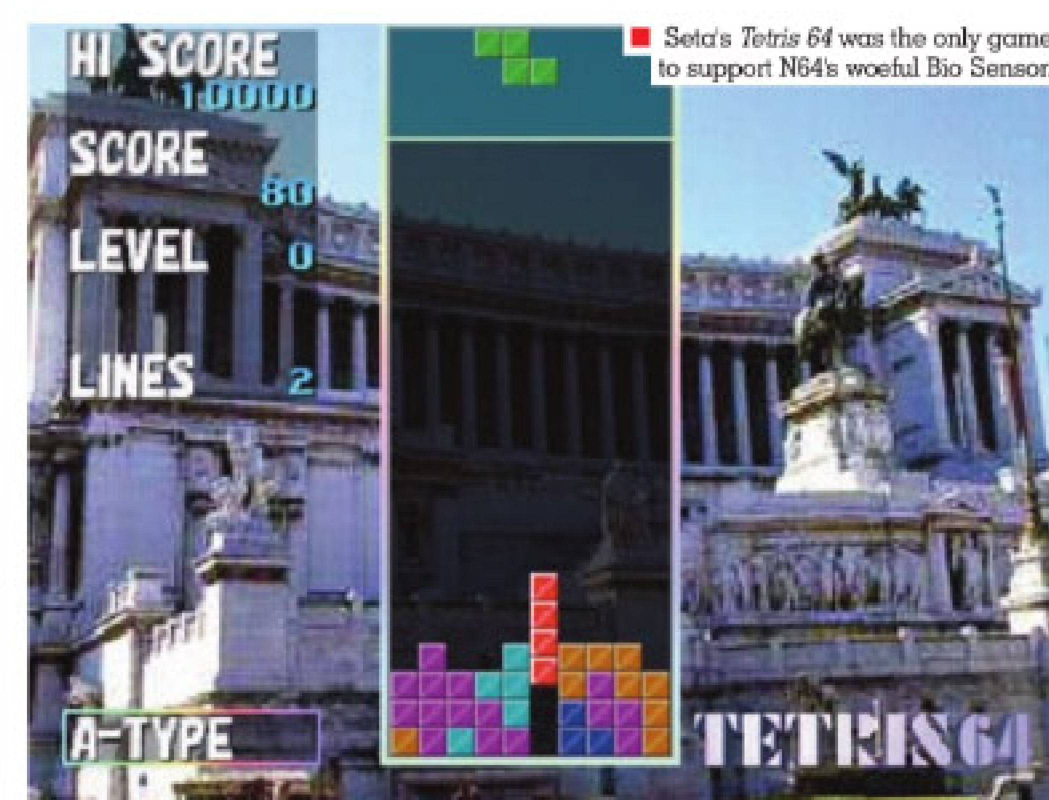


Vectrex's light pen. Not quite a touch screen but practically identical.


The PLATO system in action. Don't expect to see one on eBay anytime in the near future.

The screen itself was made from a 12x10 grid of pressure-sensitive panels, each one about a centimetre square, which made the touch detection very imprecise, since each panel would cover several in-game pixels at once. This meant that only very simple applications could take advantage of the technology and that the touch screen was rarely used for anything other than in-game menus or very slow-paced games, like the in-built version of *Solitaire*.

It might have been first, but game.com's touch screen was so underused it might as well have not existed. In this instance, Nintendo is by far the clear winner. Perhaps Yokoi was onto something after all.



Seta's *Tetris 64* was the only game to support N64's woeful Bio Sensor.

VITALITY SENSOR

WHEN NINTENDO first revealed the Vitality Sensor at E3 2009, the company somehow managed to do so without really revealing what the accessory will do. We know it will monitor the user's pulse, but to what end? We're not even sure if Nintendo has come up with an idea yet.

If it's anything like the N64's Bio Sensor, then we can't see the Vitality Sensor being much good for anything, to be honest. Released by Japanese publisher SETA in 1998, the Bio Sensor did exactly the same thing as Nintendo's plastic finger trap. It plugged directly into an N64 controller and featured a long wire with a clip on the end that you would attach to your ear lobe. This would then monitor your heart rate and adjust the game you were playing accordingly.

It's an idea so good that Nintendo thinks it will revolutionise gaming as much as motion control did four years ago… so how come SETA could only come up with one game that used the Bio Sensor? Only *Tetris 64* worked with the device and used it rather obviously – to change the pace at which the brick drops as the player's pulse quickened.

Tetris 64 never made it outside of Japan and the Bio Sensor faded into obscurity as the N64 soon breathed its last. Had the console lived longer we might have seen more Bio Sensor games… or we might not if, as we suspect, SETA lost all inspiration for the device. Let's hope Nintendo's forthcoming peripheral fares a little better.



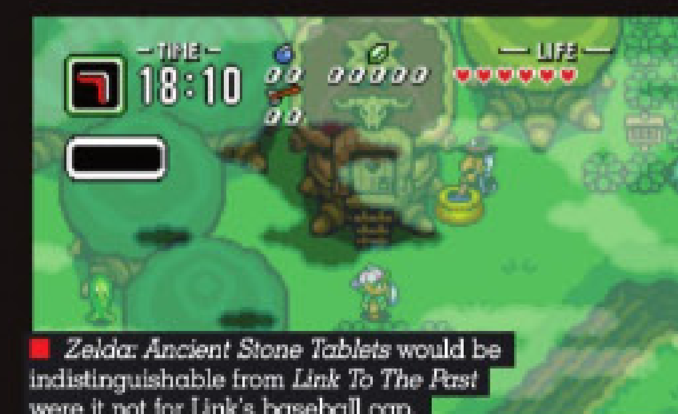
The Bio Sensor never made it outside Japan. Wii's Vitality Sensor will, but will it have better software support? We certainly hope so.

LIVE BROADCAST GAMES

MICROSOFT'S XBOX Live quiz game, *1 Vs 100*, was praised as a casual sensation when it was broadcast in 2009/2010, pundits applauding the way it schedules content like live television, drawing in players to unique events that happen at a very specific time and date. But, like everything else you'll read about here, it wasn't the first game to do so.

Released only in Japan, Nintendo's Satellaview was a Super Famicom add-on that allowed users to download new content from Satellite transmitters, directly into re-writable cartridges. It was mostly used for distributing small downloadable games but could also be used for certain titles that featured live broadcast content. The most famous of these was *The Legend Of Zelda: Ancient Stone Tablets* – a Satellaview exclusive that was played over a four-week period, each week taking Link into a different part of Hyrule on quests, and featuring narration and NPC voice acting that were read and transmitted live to users' Super Famicoms as they all played simultaneously.

Ancient Stone Tablets was broadcast throughout 1997-1998, but was sadly lost when the Satellaview service was eventually shut down. Though some owners retained their copy of the game on the official flash carts, it was rendered unplayable outside of the broadcast dates because of the absence of the live voice acting. It therefore remains one of the few great lost *Zelda* games, and one that is unlikely to be revisited by Nintendo again.



Zelda: Ancient Stone Tablets would be indistinguishable from *Link To The Past* were it not for Link's baseball cap.



KINECT

IF MICROSOFT gets its way this generation, then we'll all be playing our new games without ever holding a controller or touching a button. But, you guessed it… It's all been done before. PlayStation's Eyetoy is the obvious example of a controller without controls, but there are several more obscure examples throughout history.



Rhythm action fans may remember *ParaParaParadise*, a Konami arcade game that capitalised on the Japanese Para Para dance craze by monitoring the movement of your arms, in time to music, within open space. A few of these unusual coin-ops made their way into the UK (good luck finding them!) while a Japanese PlayStation 2 conversion was produced, complete with a complicated set of movement sensors that you placed on the floor.

Going even further back, there's the little known Sega Activator – an octagonal frame that projected laser beams from the floor and worked much like the Laser Harp musical instrument by interpreting the way your limbs interrupted the beams, turning your movements into computer instructions. Most often used in fighting games, the controller would input a punch if you broke the beam high and a kick if you broke it low. A rather unreliable piece of technology, however, the Activator wouldn't work properly if you had a sloped or mirrored ceiling. Which rules out pretty much all of the **games™** team.


The Sega Activator. One of the ugliest peripherals ever designed.



ParaParaParadise in arcade form. The unique PS2 controller is pictured below.





BEHIND THE SCENES

KILLER INSTINCT

From 64-bit arcade powerhouse to 16-bit console conversion, the making of Killer Instinct was very tough indeed. And that's before you consider the fact that it had to compete with Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat



Released: 1994 (Arcade)/ 1995 (SNES)
Format: Arcade/SNES
Publisher: Midway (Arcade)/ Nintendo (SNES)
Developer: Rare

KEY STAFF:
Chris Tilston
Lead Designer/Programmer
Mark Betteridge
Head Programmer/Lead Designer
Kevin Bayliss
Character Designer
Chris Stamper
Hardware Designer



RARE. TO A GAMER that name means quality. To an English gamer it means 'One of our flagship claims to the world's gaming industry', such is the acclaim that the company from Twycross, Leicestershire, has earned over the years. It has consistently delivered games of the highest calibre. Be it the 1984 release of *Sabre Wulf*, the 1997 FPS legend that is *GoldenEye*, or the upcoming platformer *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts*. Yet there was a time, when the company's future was in doubt. When the Stamper brothers sold Ultimate Play The Game back in 1985, and abandoned the Spectrum – a platform they had set alight within their first three years as a company – to take on the new and then un-proven Famicom, fans were left shaking their heads. Faced with an unlimited budget from Nintendo and tasked with developing games back home on a system few British people could even afford, Rare got into the business of licensed games and ports.

Though the constant string of NES releases brought in huge profits, Rare had lost its innovation and was in danger of becoming just another developer. Its best chance of breaking the mould and keeping ahead of the game lay in 16-bit consoles. If Rare wanted to win big, it had to risk big. And so it was that the company cut back its production and exchanged the massive profit it had garnered from the NES into the production of Silicon Graphics workstations. This move made Rare the most technologically advanced developer in the UK, but what would it do with this newfound power?

"It was the golden age of fighting games," says Chris Tilston, gameplay programmer and lead designer on *Killer Instinct*. "They were more popular at that time in the arcades than they had CONTINUED >.

THE CHARACTERS WERE MADE MORE FANTASTICAL TO MAKE THE GAME STAND OUT





The pre-rendered character sprites, FMVs and adjustable-framed 'movie' backgrounds made *Killer Instinct* the best-looking arcade fighter of its day.











Killer Instinct took *Mortal Kombat's* Fatalities and, by some miracle, managed to make them even more stupid. Death by pixelated breasts. Let that be a lesson to you.




Killer Instinct's characters are arguably the most unique part of the game and the chief reason for its success. A hot woman performing a 48-hit Ultra Combo with legs flailing everywhere. Er… Yes please.







"U-L-T-R-A C-O-M-B-O!" one of arcade gaming's greatest thrills.

FROM THE
FORUM

Posted by:
THE DUDE
I loved *Killer Instinct*. I got pretty good at it down at the local flea pit as well. I would love to see a new version.

Posted by:
PAL VERSION
I remember pulling off one of those multi-hit combo-type finishing moves against a mate. It was his game and he couldn't believe that I managed it. It was a complete fluke, too, as I was just mashing the buttons.

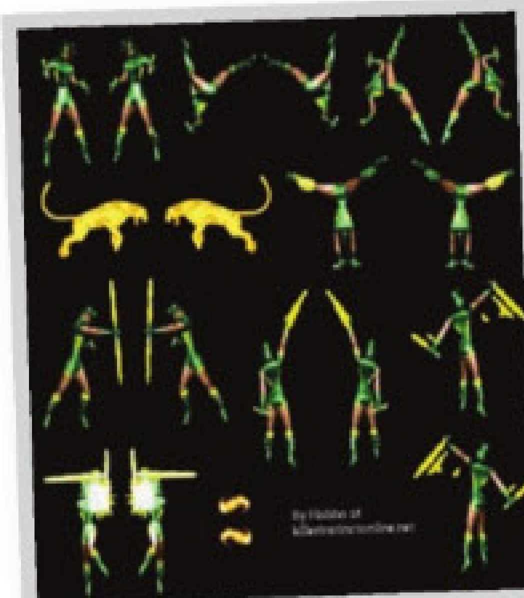
Posted by:
DEXTERXS
Looking back, it seemed to me that it was remorselessly sponging off the popularity of *Mortal Kombat* with similar sprites and similar design principles. Looking closer, it did actually experiment with a lot of different mechanics – automatic/ultra combos and combo breakers for example – as well as more complex inputs and specials, which gave it considerably more depth than *Mortal Kombat*. Unfortunately, I wasn't all that concerned with depth when I was ten.

Posted by:
RADIOFLOYD
I like the *Sabre Wulf* character or whatever his name was, and the guy who could make himself slide along the ground like some kind of liquid.

Posted by:
SOMERSET BUMPKIN
It was the only arcade machine that my brother and I would rush up to like barracuda to a shiny knife. There was just something about the characters – they were unreal back in the early-Nineties. I can't really remember how it played, but that wasn't important.

Production Values

■ THE MORTAL KOMBAT and *Street Fighter* series, upon which the early beat-'em-up battle was fought, are undoubtedly two of the most famous gaming franchises ever. Naturally, having to tear the two apart to enter the battle required something a little special. Thankfully, Rare was more than willing to put its money where its mouth was. A technological powerhouse, *Killer Instinct* was the first arcade game to use an internal hard disk drive, with a Risc R4600 processor running at 100MHz, giving access to graphics far and beyond those of *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* at the time. Alongside the Silicon Graphics-created pre-rendered character sprites and adjustable 'movie' backgrounds, *Killer Instinct* set the arcade screens ablaze in what was a gamer's dream at the time. Not only were the graphics sublime, but the soundtrack, *Killer Cuts*, was also of such a high-quality mix of up-tempo electronica that it merited a commercial CD album release. Needless to say, Rare threw everything behind *Killer Instinct*'s production that it possibly could. To this day it remains one of the highest-quality arcade productions in the industry's history.





■ The beastly Eyedol's ability to wipe out an entire energy bar with a single combo made him one tough boss. If you made it to this screen on a single credit in the arcade, let it be known that you are a legend.

ever been, and we were all big fans. It just made sense to enter this market with what people were playing most." And therein lay the main competition for all beat-'em-ups at the time.

Although *Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat* had brought unprecedented popularity to the genre, they had also set the basis for all that was to come. As a whole string of titles proved, differentiating a game from the two giants was far from easy. Whereas other genres benefit from the numerous ways in which they can distinguish themselves, the beat-'em-up is incredibly closed-set: story means nothing, environment means little. Great gameplay is essential, of course, but it's difficult to market a game on something so intangible. If there is one element of the beat-'em-up genre that can be communicated easily it is the characters, so that's where Rare began.

THE PRODUCTION PHASE STARTED IN MID-APRIL AND WE HAD TO BE DONE BY OCTOBER

■■■ "A prototype started back in June 1993," explains Tilston, "when Mark Betteridge [now studio head] had a couple of boxers [one of which became TJ Combo], which lead artist Kevin Bayliss had modelled on screen, running on Rare's old arcade hardware. Initially the theme was one of 'street punks', where the characters were more based in reality – a basketball player, for example – but we changed this to more fantastical characters that would make the game stand out. Things that might have been familiar



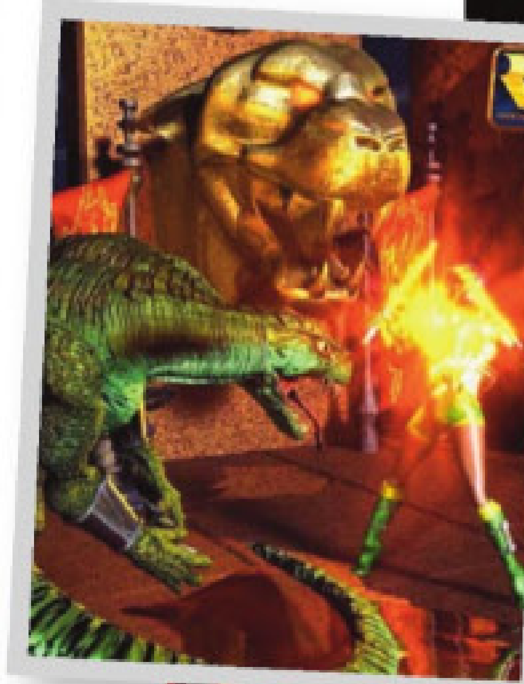
but you hadn't seen before in the context of a fighting game, grounded by some more traditional characters." By Christmas the game's personalities had been designed and modelled, and animation tests had begun with an early motion-capture system.

Being such a transitional period in Rare's evolution, the team were limited to working on old hardware. As Tilston states: "The archaic motion-capture suit was joined by wires and was a bit temperamental, and we didn't even have any final hardware to work off – it was still being designed." Thankfully, Rare founder Chris Stamper, who had "Raised eyebrows about the fact that he was designing the hardware", produced the first prototype at the beginning of 1994, and the team began porting the engine over. "We put together a brief presentation doc with all of the characters Kevin had modelled, and came up with the theme that would glue all of these characters together. This was sent off to Nintendo who greenlighted the game, wanting it to appear on their new 'Ultra 64' hardware but also agreeing that it would go into arcades first.

"The name at this time was *Brute Force*, which we didn't go with because someone had the trademarks on a *Brute Force* clothing line. The final theme – and the name *Killer Instinct* – came along a short while later when we tried to glue all of these diverse characters together in a setting that could be slightly more believable. In March, more pieces of hardware appeared and I started putting in the moves we had motion captured and rendered out as sprites into the game. We also got a few more people at this time, almost trebling the team size from three to eight, and were introduced to Ken Lobb [of recent *Crackdown* and *Gears Of War* fame], who then worked at Nintendo. A fighting game maniac, he would visit often to try out the game and pummel us with great ideas. The production phase started for real in mid-April and we had to hit our stride pretty quickly as I think we had to be done by October."

■■■ *Killer Instinct* was released into the arcades, with a boom in October 1994. Where Rare's production values had always been of the highest standard, *Killer Instinct* was something else. Its technical mastery drowned out every other arcade game around. Be it the electronica opening theme, the booming voiceover yelling 'Ultra Combo' or Fulgore's gun-turret-head finisher going off like a drive-by shooting, the cabinet seemed to ignite the arcades. Rare had hit the hardware jackpot. "We could do a lot with the hardware that others couldn't," says Tilston. "The hard drive allowed us to stream in lots of different frames for the background and give them this sense of depth that you hadn't seen from the usual way of doing backgrounds. The silicon graphics technology of rendering a model that had been ray-traced inside Maya gave us the unique look for our characters, and although the CPU didn't have any custom 3D hardware, it was powerful enough to render some basic polygon geometry for the three-dimensional arenas, although probably not powerful enough to do full 3D-textured characters." When it came to visuals, Rare's *Killer Instinct* hadn't just raised the bar, it had launched it into the stratosphere, elevating its presentation far beyond that of the competition. But could Rare achieve the same sort of success with the gameplay? Something that couldn't be improved with an endless supply of expensive hardware.

■ "Available in your home in 1995, only on Nintendo Ultra 64." Though wrong, truly words to make a hardcore gaming fan salivate at the mouth.







As Tilston comments: "We borrowed a bit from [*Street Fighter II* and *Mortal Kombat*] but always tried to take things in a different direction. We looked at *Street Fighter* and saw that it had this emergent system where you could pull off these strings of moves, but this was so difficult that only a fraction of the player base could do it, so we wanted to come up with something that was more accessible to a wider audience. And of course death moves were all the rage then thanks to *Mortal Kombat*, so we put in our version of them."

This isn't to say that *Killer Instinct* didn't bring something of its own to the genre. In CONTINUED >.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



One of *Killer Instinct*'s main influences was *Street Fighter II*. Obviously. The stringing of moves was simplified to make KI combos.



Mortal Kombat 3 was, in turn, influenced by *KI*, using a combo system with text stating the number of hits and damage percentage.







■ Why isn't *Killer Instinct* available on Xbox Live Arcade yet? Riptor wants to know right now.

In fact, it is difficult to name a 2D fighter that garnered the commercial success of *Killer Instinct* while deviating so much from the formula. Its Ultra Combos, accessible yet incredibly stylish stringing technique, three-dimensional backgrounds, Humiliations, No mercys, and its unique characters all stood it apart – according to Tilston, this is what kept them hooked. "We could see from weekly arcade reports how commercially successful the game was becoming," Tilston remembers. "Although the *Killer Instinct* arcade machine was highly expensive for the time, in some arcades a single cabinet would take over a thousand dollars a week. It wasn't long before the machines had paid for themselves… and that popularity continued for a long time."

■■■ Creating the arcade version of *Killer Instinct* had been an arduous and chancy gamble, but porting it to the console market was an even riskier venture. Had the arcade game's introduction 'Available for your home in 1995, only on Nintendo Ultra 64', been accurate, life may have been much easier, but when Nintendo announced that the then Ultra 64 was to be put back until September 1996, Rare had a major dilemma. The arcade's success had ignited demand in a console version, but having to move the port of one of the most advanced arcade games around from a 64-bit system to a 16-bit machine that was rapidly going out of date, was a technological nightmare. "Memory was the big issue," remarks Tilston, "and the multi-frame backgrounds and 3D backgrounds had to go. The other difficult part I remember was cramming all of the moves in. We had to take out 80 per cent of the frames that made up a single move and borrow from other places. It took both me and Kevin about four months of solid work, going through frames and cutting them down while trying to keep moves vaguely resembling the originals." Needless to say, the changes were more than apparent.





■ Unfortunately, SNES memory issues turned the ultra-slick graphics of the arcade version of *Killer Instinct* into rather dated clumps of pixels on home machines.

A SINGLE KILLER INSTINCT ARCADE CABINET COULD TAKE OVER $1,000 A WEEK

The motion-captured, flawlessly smooth moves of the arcade version became choppy and fractured, the characters blocky and the backgrounds no longer 3D. What had far surpassed any other beat-'em-up for graphics and sound in the arcade, at home – against the newly released PlayStation – suddenly looked dated. This placed all the attention and any chance of *Killer Instinct*'s success at home on the gameplay. It is testament to the game's design that, despite its problems, the SNES version of *Killer Instinct* received critical acclaim and featured in *Nintendo Power*'s Top 200 Games On A Nintendo Console list. "That's surprising," comments Tilston, "as I honestly don't think we ever did nail a definitive home version of the arcade *Killer Instinct*. There never really was a one-to-one conversion due to the hardware limits of the home platforms." So, what does Tilston attribute this success to? "Characters that players hadn't seen before is one reason. The graphical look is another. The ease with which you could pull off combos. And the music really helped give it this attitude. Maybe where *Mortal Kombat* was dark and *Street Fighter II* was cartoon, we were somewhere in the middle."

The problems that Rare had suffered with the SNES port of *Killer Instinct* would once again surface with the N64 version of *Killer Instinct 2* (*Killer Instinct: Gold*). The arcade version was an absolute powerhouse. The speakers damn near collapsed the cabinet; the characters were beautifully rendered, their moves seamlessly smooth; and the FMV sequences that were your reward for 'special' victories were slick and stylish. Fans pleaded that this conversion would give them the perfect port they had so longed for. Sadly, history repeated itself. Gone were the FMV sequences on N64, the characters were blocky, the moves often disjointed, and the audio lacked oomph. All this left a sour taste in the mouths of fans wanting a definitive home version. Hope turned to a third outing.

■ Though *Killer Instinct 2* didn't captivate the arcade audiences like its predecessor, the new characters and combos made it more than worthy of a few credits.

■■■ For any *Killer Instinct* fan, the fact that the series seems to have finished after its second outing is something of a sore point. Where *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* have put out more than enough versions of themselves to make the average fan penniless, Rare's series seems to have died in its infancy. "I think management looked at the sales of *Donkey Kong Country* [9 million] and *Killer Instinct* [3.2 million] and just didn't want to go after a market that was a third of the size of the platform game market," Tilston explains. "This was probably why we started off on a 3D platformer [*Conker*, then known as *Twelve Tales: Conker 64*]."

Even now, a quick look on the internet will confirm fans' hunger for a third instalment. The past few months have been littered with rumours of leaked sheet music for the title theme and purported slips from Rare nodding to a sequel. With such a constant flow of pseudo-news it seems impossible to know the truth. The only certainty on the matter is that there is and always was a definite possibility of number three. "In early-1999 I did start designing *KI3* with a very small team," reveals Tilston. "This was more of an evolutionary game, and we did get a prototype going with Jago in full 3D with motion-captured moves [and running at 60fps]. We had the advantage of designing the game for a home audience rather than an arcade audience, so we were going to move it in a different direction rather than just include a few new characters and a different story. This was stopped when I had to move onto *Perfect Dark* to help lead the design when a few members of that team left really early on in development. Looking back at the stuff I did in 1999, it's probably still relevant ten years later, and the fighting game market – although much more refined than it was – hasn't really gone forward that much," Tilston remarks.

But if our hopes come true and there is another *Killer Instinct*, what form will it take? "I think if we were to do a *KI3* now it would have to be more of a revolutionary concept, and we have a few ideas about where it should go." So, what's the definitive answer? Will we ever again strain our thumbs to pull off a combo of hits to single-handedly wipe out civilisation? "I don't know," Tilston concludes.

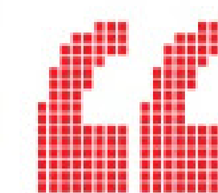


■ Every retro game has to have an ice level. *Killer Instinct* had an ice character. As did *Mortal Kombat*, we suppose. Sub Zero's not as cool as Glacius though.

KILLER INSTINCT 3?

Rare keeps the series' fans guessing

■ GAME FANS know that rumours of *Killer Instinct 3* have been spreading like wildfire all over the internet, and it's no surprise that the vast number of fans – who were thrilled with the arcade releases only to be twice disappointed with the home versions – are optimistically leaping at the 'news'. Such a demand for a new instalment of the series has been stimulated that petiononline.com now holds a list of the names of more than 2,400 fans demanding that Rare should create the game. In return, Rare's response has done much to quench the fire while always keeping the door open to the idea. The rumours are certainly not without evidence. A 2008 issue of *Xbox World 360* magazine finished its Next Month section by saying: "And a killer secret game. Let's just say it's a biggie, a reinvention of a classic." Add to this the fact that the specialist games press received a 2007 Christmas card from Rare with 'KI3' written on the stocking; the sheet music that was supposedly sent to Rare fan site MundoRare of *Killer Instinct 3*'s theme tune; and, above all, the fact that Rare has confirmed that it began work on the title years ago and never outright denied the game's existence, and you have a very interesting possibility. Of course, we won't know for certain until Rare finally confirms or denies the project absolutely, but it's still more than enough reason to get a little excited.

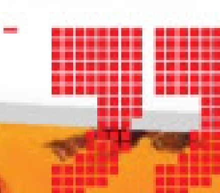


What They Said…



All in all it's a good game with some flaws. It isn't as deep as Street Fighter or as well made as MK II, but it's in contention with those brawlers – maybe not a killer, but definitely a felon

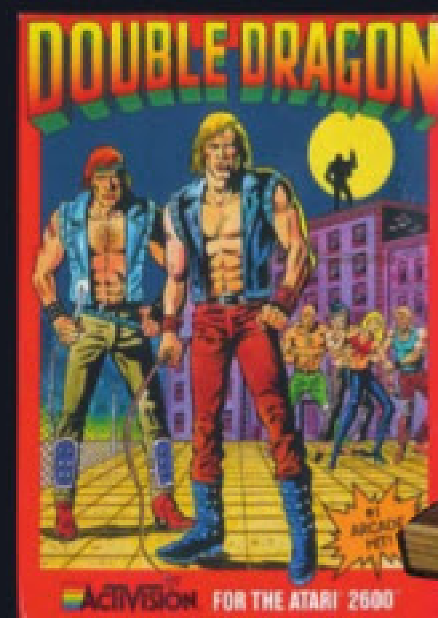
GamePro Volume 7 Issue 9





CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight





SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1989
Publisher: Activision
Developer: In-House

DOUBLE DRAGON

THE HYPE



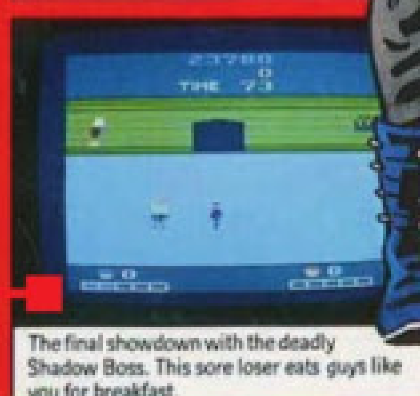
ONE OF the first great scrolling beat-'em-up games, Technos's *Double Dragon* was a real phenomenon when it first hit the arcades in 1987. The developer's previous title, *Renegade*, virtually invented the genre and was considered a breath of fresh air among the dominant shoot-'em-ups and sports games of the arcade at the time. And though *Renegade* was an undeniably important release, it was its spiritual successor, *Double Dragon*, that really defined the genre. Establishing many tropes of the scrolling beat-'em-up, *Double Dragon* introduced the ability to pick up and use new weapons mid-level and, more importantly, allowed two players to fight their way through the streets in co-operation. This social aspect became the defining feature of scrolling fighters for years to come, and made *Double Dragon* the sort of videogame that every kid wanted to play at home with their school friends.

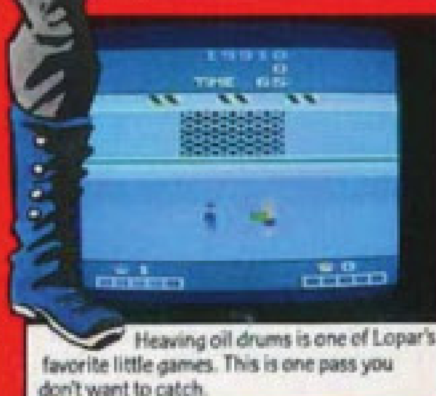
THE WARNING SIGNS

"No Quarters Required," boasts the box, but that claim is only worthwhile if you get more than 25 cents' worth of entertainment from the full-price cartridge.

The captions refer to enemies as though they all have individual characteristics. But they just look like indistinct Lego bricks to us.







The box promises the 2600's best graphics about six years after the release of the far superior *Pitfall II*. The box is a liar.



THE REALITY

THE ATARI 2600 was released in 1977, while the coin-op version of *Double Dragon* appeared in arcades a full decade later. Graphically speaking, the two were worlds apart and you really have to wonder why anyone thought they would make a good match, other than the obviously lucrative nature of the licence. The game is almost unrecognisable from the coin-op, the music is just a few monotonous tones that endlessly loop, and the gameplay is abysmal. You'll get past the first screen by spamming the same two attacks, but then the enemies learn to do the same and trap you in an endless fly-kick combo until you're completely out of life and you decide to take the cartridge back to the shop.

1 The backgrounds definitely look the part, particularly on the later screens where Activision does a great job of simulating a city skyline. Despite the changes on each screen, however, each background has no effect on gameplay and is therefore pointless.

2 One of *Double Dragon's* defining features is the ability to pick up different weapons and use them to beat your enemies to a pulp. But the Atari 2600 version has none of that. There's nothing to pick up and nothing to interact with.

3 Atari's single-button controller makes combat awkward. Pressing different directions in conjunction with the button initiates different attack types, but it's a chore compared to the arcade version and proves that the 2600 just wasn't suited to some types of game.

What You Should Have Played It On





The Mega Drive and GBA versions of *Double Dragon* are probably the best, but they weren't released until 1993 and 2003 respectively. So we'll go for the 1988 NES version instead. The visuals weren't quite there yet, but the gameplay was much more faithful to the real thing.

Hall Of Fame… Dizzy

He's the most famous 8-bit hero to ever grace microcomputers, starring in no less than 15 games, and making appearances on some of the most popular games machines of all time. Join us as we we crack the shell of videogames' original good egg

SHELL-SHOCKED IS probably the best expression to explain our reaction after we called time on our online poll and saw that the **games™** readership had selected Dizzy to be our final Hall Of Fame inductee. After all, Dizzy was up against some pretty big names. On the list of potential candidates was the big ape that started it all for Nintendo, Mario's missus, and an elven hero who blazed his own trail in Miyamoto's back garden. However, after revisiting Dizzy's games to research and write this piece this month, we realised that there was more to this unassuming character than we first thought, and that in many respects Dizzy is a fitting hero to help send the Hall Of Fame on its way.

Until his popularity was later eclipsed by Lara Croft many years later, Dizzy was the closest thing Britain had to an iconic platforming game hero after he rolled onto our monitors in 1986. The years before *Dizzy's* release were proving a glum time for Thatcherite Britain, with the early Eighties recession hitting unemployment hard, and the Falklands War and Miners Strike of 1984 causing further unrest. At the time, the British computer industry was still very much a cottage industry, but its rapid growth meant it wouldn't stay this way for long.

Working from their homes, many programmers, upon seeing the gloomy state that society was in, looked to inject irreverent humour and fun into their games in reaction. Heroes like Monty Mole and Miner Willy consequently emerged, and their adventures proved perfect, if unexpected, affordable little anti-depressants to help lift people's spirits – well those of the people playing games anyway. In many ways, Dizzy can be seen as the culmination of these whimsical titles and heroes, a character with a series of enchanting, uplifting and humorous adventures that saw him become England's most successful platforming hero of the Eighties.

A common tale with many 8-bit heroes, Dizzy came about not through considerate design, but rather an awareness of the graphical boundaries of 8-bit computers. The character was the creation of the Oliver Twins, Phillip and Andrew, and sprang forth from a discussion about ways they could overcome the issues of drawing and animating human characters and display happy, sad and scared expressions on a sprite. This led them to believe that the easiest way to achieve this would be to simply draw a big round face. The idea stuck, and after a few tweaks, including the addition of gloves and boots, the egg was cooked and fit for adventure.

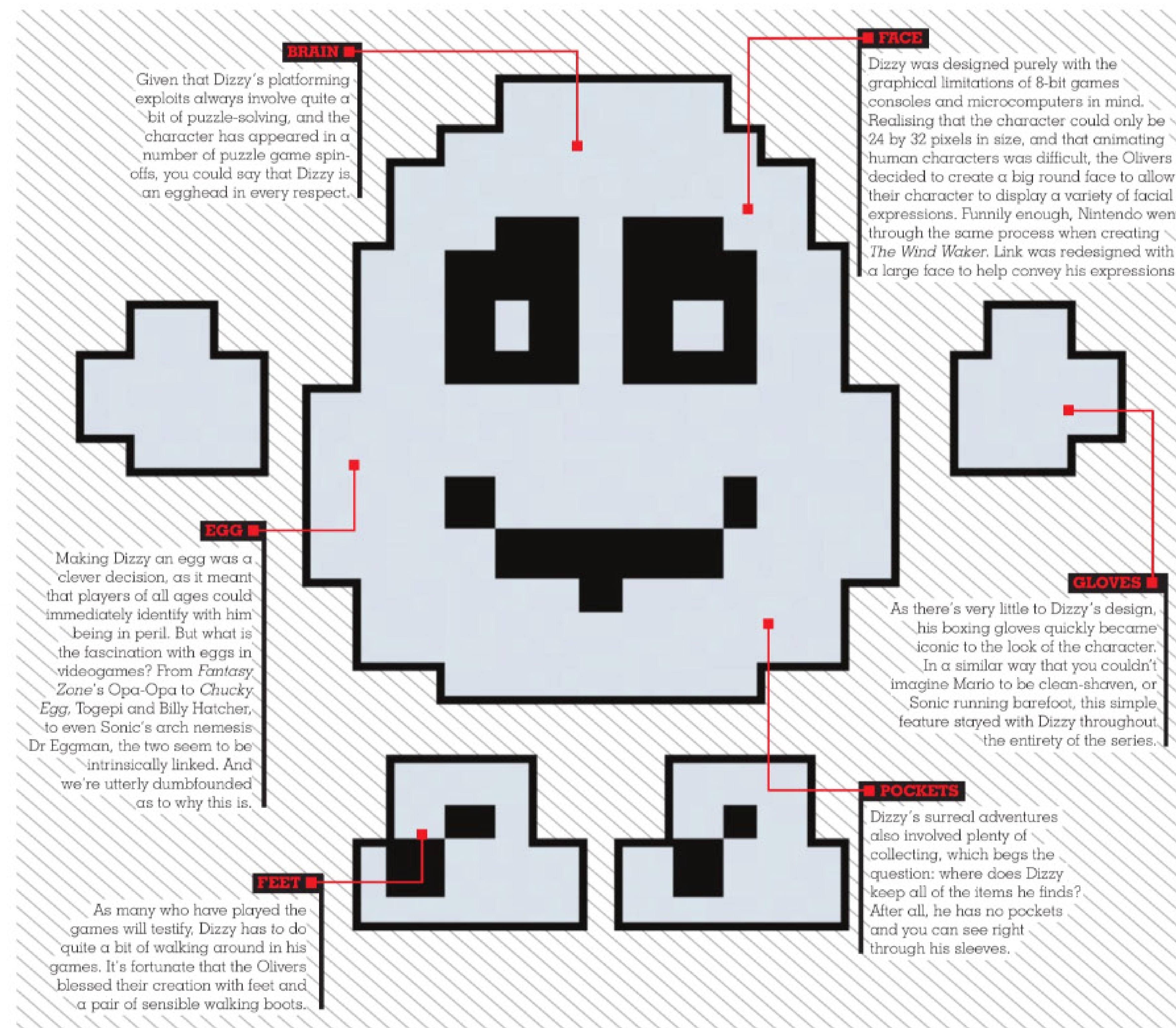
Published by Codemasters, which distributed all of Dizzy's adventures, sales of Dizzy's first game were initially slow. However, by the release of *Fantasy World Dizzy* in 1988, once word had spread of how fresh and charming this new 8-bit cartoon creation was, Dizzy had become a household name. And by the end of the Eighties, his popularity had swelled so much that the Olivers realised that, in order to cope with demand, they would need to enlist the help of a third party, Big Red Software, while still maintaining creative input.

With this extra manpower, the early Nineties marked the most prolific period for *Dizzy*, with five games released in 1990 alone. However, with global popularity for Nintendo's moustachioed hero growing with every new release, thanks to the popularity of trendy new 16-bit Japanese games consoles and the birth of an edgy new Sega mascot, Dizzy was soon to face his most difficult challenge yet.

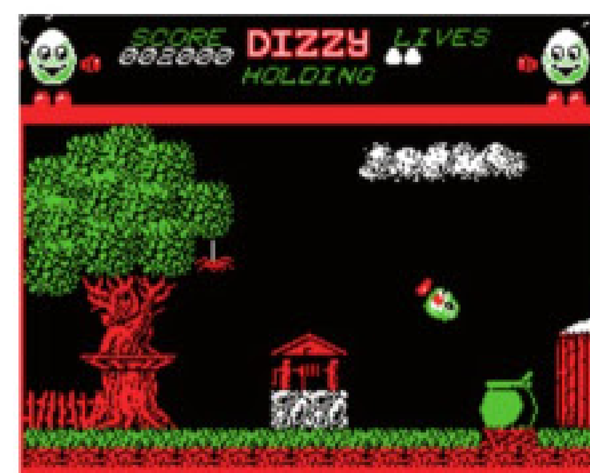
With his popularity confined to the UK, the cracks were beginning to show. And in 1993, following a few unsuccessful attempts to break Dizzy into the console market overseas, Codemasters eventually made the decision to stop publishing *Dizzy* games, marking the end of a remarkable era for both Dizzy and the Olivers.

Notable for being one of the few videogame heroes to have witnessed the growth and progression of the industry in the UK, Dizzy was there in the fledgling years of the computer game scene. He witnessed game development change hands from small two-man partnerships to larger development troupes, and later saw the impact that second wave of game consoles would have on microcomputers and the UK game industry as a whole.

While there hasn't been a new *Dizzy* game in over 17 years – unless you count some of the fantastic homebrew fan-projects still finding release, or the excellent *Dizzy*-inspired XBLA and PC game *Clover* – the character still remains popular to those who remember him. Dizzy is a true British gaming icon who effortlessly reminds us of the significance and history of those halcyon days of videogames, a period that gave us so many unforgettable gaming memories and adventures.



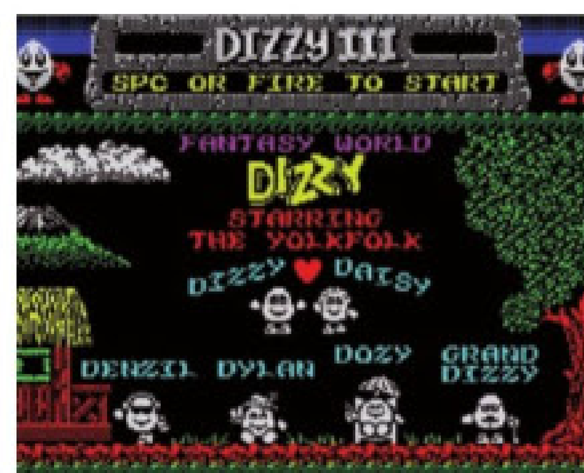
>. MAGIC MOMENTS



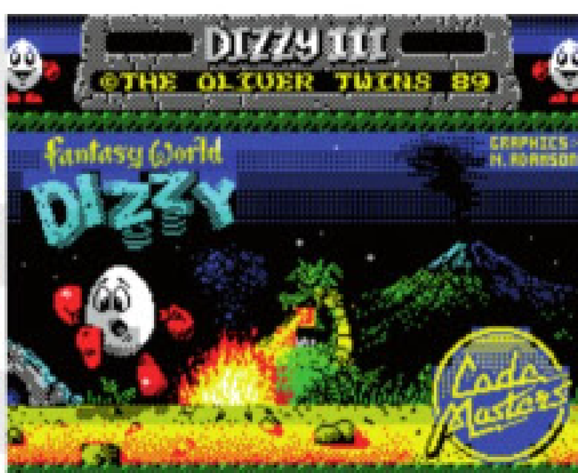
■ Dizzy made his videogame debut in 1986, and slowly grew in popularity with gamers of the day.



■ Codemasters was canny; licensed bags, clocks and t-shirts were sold. But, oddly, no egg cups.



■ 1988's *Fantasy World Dizzy* introduced the Yolk Folk, Dizzy's scramble of friends and relatives.



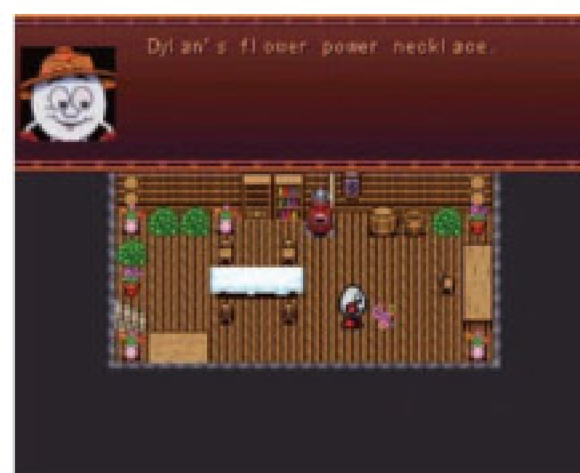
■ Dizzy's second sequel, *Fantasy World Dizzy*, introduced ideas that became series staples.



■ A video shows how *Dizzy* would have looked on the PS2 (www.fantasticworlddizzy.co.uk).



■ Dizzy appeared in a series of spin-off games, such as the very playable *Kwik Snax*.



■ Dizzy's popularity shows no sign of diminishing, with a huge number of fan-made games out there.



■ This five-screen game was given away as a free covermount on a December issue of *Crash*.

A DIZZYING COMEBACK

Now the co-founders of Blitz Games, the Oliver Twins have considered bringing Dizzy back for the modern age, but often claim that the character and gameplay of Dizzy just aren't relevant to modern gamers. Here are a few ideas of how we think he could make a comeback…



■ *DIZZY ROCK Band* brings together a string of classic songs, stretching across various musical genres, all tenuously linked to the theme of eggs in some way. Help Dizzy's musical alter-ego Eggy Pop – and his covers band The Yolk Folk – crack Right Said Fred and Sinead O Conner's entire back catalogue, as well as the songs 'The Egg' by Herbie Hancock and 'Egg Man' by the Beastie Boys. If all that wasn't enough to make this an essential purchase, there's also a few hidden tracks to unlock too, including the popular Nineties hit 'Dizzy' by Vic Reeves and the Wonder Stuff and the Beatles classic 'I Am The Walrus' - which includes the lyrics 'I am the egg man', in case you were querying its inclusion.





■ DIZZY IS certainly no stranger to adventure, having been on quite a few in his time. So when Nathan Drake gets a call from an excitable antique dealer to say that he has a map detailing the whereabouts of the eight lost imperial Fabergé Eggs and wants to hire the cocksure adventurer to recover them, he asks Dizzy to accompany him on the mission. However, the unlikely duo soon realise that they are not the only ones embarking on this most epic of egg hunts. A group of evil egg worshipers are also out to poach the famous object de arts too, as legend has it that when all 50 are placed in an ovoid shape a great evil will hatch from the ground and peck the universe to death.



■ A STRANGE outbreak of salmonella has turned shoppers inside a busy supermarket into empty shells, and free-range eggs into charming little sentient beings. In this sandbox survival-horror game players have just 72 hours to help Dizzy, one of these good eggs, save all of his fragile friends while trying not to get stamped on by the inexorable horde of brain-dead customers inside the store. If that wasn't enough of an ask, Dizzy must also suffer an inexcusable torrent of annoyingness from a hairy farmer called Otis Washington, who will harass Dizzy every six or seven minutes of game time by flying his crop sprayer outside of the supermarket and scrawling pointless messages onto a tiny, illegible plane banner.



■ FOLLOWING THE debate surrounding the Jubulani football in this year's World Cup, Adidas decides to invest billions of pounds in researching the perfect round object for use in future competitions. The company's dubious findings lead it to believe that substituting footballs with hard boiled eggs is the answer. As a result, the FA makes the unprecedented decision to make international tournaments yearly, kicking off every Easter Sunday, and eggs from around the world are forced to undergo a gruelling competition to prove they're robust enough to withstand getting kicked around a field for 90-plus minutes. Players must help Dizzy realise his dream of becoming one of these chosen eggs, by competing and winning in a series of finger-punishing Track & Field-style endurance tests.





■ A NEW terrorist cell is taking biological warfare to sickening new levels through the force-feeding of staples and Tabasco sauce to battery hens. Creating the world's first egg-bomb, the terrorists have found the most unlikely of terror targets in the form of busy egg fairs. Governments, powerless to shut these events down due to ridiculous bylaws, enlist the help of Dizzy and his crack team of toasted soldiers to put a stop to these evil egg-sploders. In this brand new action-packed spin-off to Activision's popular *Call Of Duty* franchise, Dizzy must travel to egg fairs around the globe, in a daring race to defuse these bombs before a young child is hit in the eye with hot sauce – or worse, an errant staple.

■ DIZZY ARRIVES in Las Vegas without a penny to his name, looking to make his fortune. Quickly he gets caught up in the shady world of faux-casinos: pop-up-overnight gambling establishments set up to fleece money from unsuspecting tourists. But when a canny poker shark posing as a frail grandmother takes Dizzy for nearly $100,000, his boss gives him an ultimatum: retrieve the money in 48 hours or face getting turned into an omelette and fed to one of Siegfried & Roy's white tigers. In this newest instalment of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, players will experience the surreal side of Sin City from an egg's perspective, in what critics are hailing as the barmiest sandbox game ever created.

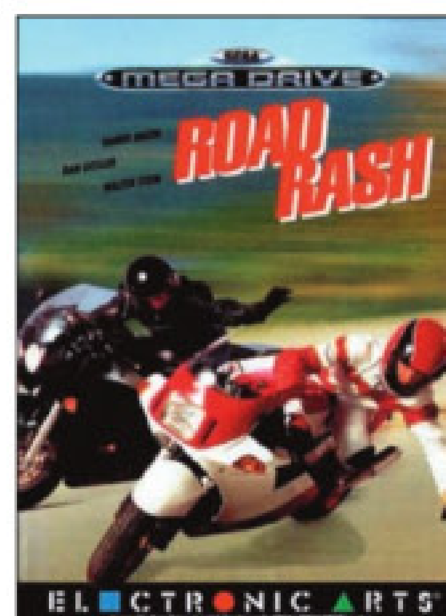




BEHIND THE SCENES

ROAD RASH

Motorcycle racing has a history of heated rivalries, but in 1991 the digital medium got its own taste, as two videogame designers competed to create the Mega Drive's defining motorcycle game



Released: 1991
Format: Mega Drive, Amiga, Atari ST, Master System, Game Gear, Game Boy, Game Boy Color
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Carl Mey Technical Director
Randall Breen Producer
Dan Geisler Programmer
Walter Stein Programmer



NOT ONLY IS living with a high performance motorbike an exhilarating lifestyle choice, it's also difficult to describe to the uninitiated, because although some similarities can be drawn to the safe existence of your average car driver, in comparison, motorcycling is an extreme pursuit that features a broad spectrum of challenges – not least of which is severely limited boot space and the wonderfully erratic nature of the British weather. But rather than getting from A to B in maximum comfort and dryness, motorbikes, by their very nature, have always been about the thrill of the ride.

Yet throughout history there have been few games to encapsulate that quintessential riding spirit, with most either going for pure arcade antics, like Sega's spectacular *Manx TT Superbike*, or, as is the case with the recently released *SBK X*, unadulterated simulation – a hurdle which still seems insurmountable when you consider real-life motorcycles require full body control. But in 1991, a plucky EA development team decided that realism wasn't the answer, and after pairing illegal street racing with cop chases and the ability to clobber other bikers off their machines with batons, they released what many regard as the pinnacle of motorcycle gaming.

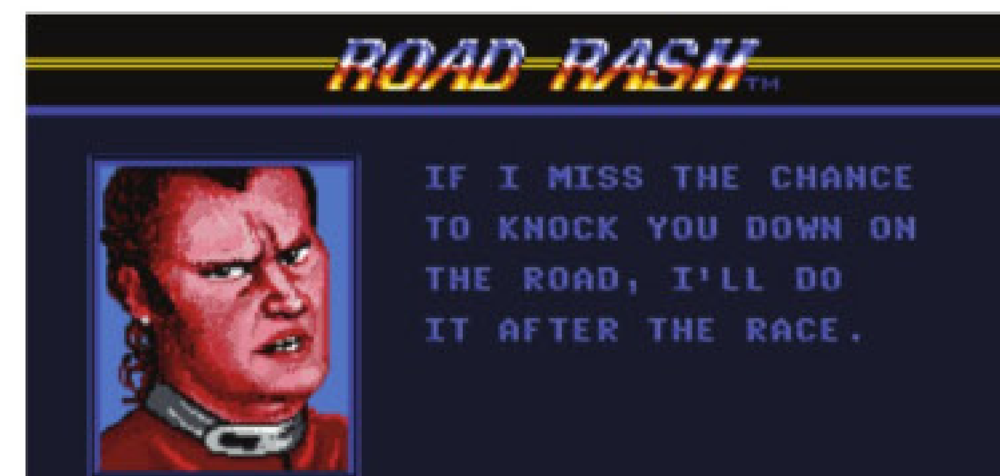
"I was working on the *Rampage* project for the Lynx which got axed [after Epyx went bankrupt] and I was laid off with 90 other people. My next job was at EA as a Technical Director in late 1989," recalls a nostalgic Carl Mey who, at this point in his career, had already worked as a programmer for Lucasfilm Games on *Maniac Mansion*. "Not long after starting at EA I was asked to create a banked road effect for *Andretti Racing* and, after staying up all night, I had created a great effect, but with no banking. It was too much CONTINUED >.

I WANTED THE PLAYER TO FEEL AS IF HE WAS THE CHARACTER ON THE SCREEN



The original *Road Rash* is the only game in the series where you can't knock the cops off their bikes – not even by bashing them into an oncoming car. Carl told us this was done to make sure the player would keep on riding forward.





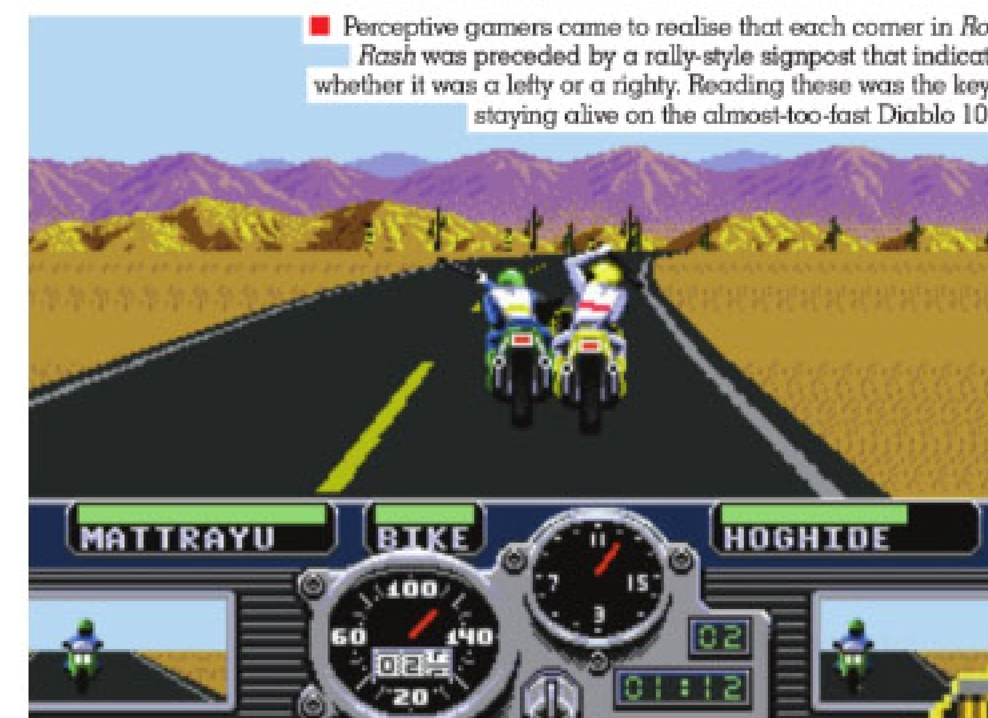








Perceptive gamers came to realise that each corner in *Road Rash* was preceded by a rally-style signpost that indicated whether it was a lefty or a righty. Reading these was the key to staying alive on the almost-too-fast Diablo 1000.



Once knocked off the saddle, it was possible for your biker to sprint a mile in under three minutes. Not bad for someone wearing a crash helmet and decked out in full race leathers.











FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: BOSSEYE
God, I loved *Road Rash*. The soundtrack on the Hawaii tracks, GUNGA DUNGA DAGGA DA DAH!

Posted by: MICKMICK198282
Original and hours of fun; they don't make them like this any more! Used to love taking the truncheon off the cops and then hitting them with it – brilliant!

Posted by: RYAN WHITELAW
One of my favourite Mega Drive games. Growing up in a biker family made it all the better but my Harley-riding dad criticised the violence, thinking it would influence teenage bikers to smack each other with clubs. The Ron Hubbard soundtrack was brilliant too. Also, the less said about the 3DO version, the better.

Posted by: MR MARVELLOUS
Loved it. I think the sequel was the best in the series. I remember many arguments with my mate over the best bike. I preferred the better handling of the Panda 750 over the brute horsepower of the Diablo 1000, which he favoured.

Posted by: THEBOYINGREEN
There was nothing worse than flying off the bike after a crash. The run back to the bike seemed to take an eternity.

Posted by: GRIZZLY
This game was brilliant! A great mix of beat-'em-up and racer. *Mario Kart* had nothing on it in the way of fun.

Posted by: FATBOYSLICK
Road Rash was great. They made a real effort to inject some personality into it with the rival drivers and types of bike. I loved the little animated sketches after each race, and I'll never forget the secret bike that was so fast that you'd hit a hill or ramp and be in the air for two minutes.



BURN HUBBARD

■ ASK A FELLOW Mega Drive fan what they liked most about *Road Rash* and they'll probably talk about the impressive graphics, sense of speed, rudimentary violence, or perhaps even the random and often comical nature of the crashes. But doubtless there'll be a few who'll give a nostalgic shout-out for the adrenaline-pumping tunes, and for good reason, as the digitised combination of catchy solos, slapstick bass and drum machine loops somehow added more flair to an already thumping game. But who gets credit for crafting the 'Radar Love' of retro videogame soundtracks? Michael Bartlow and Rob Hubbard, of course.

The former you may not have heard of, but the Yorkshire-born Rob Hubbard is a legendary music composer who's best remembered for his unparalleled work on the Commodore 64. This includes a spectacular intro to EA's *Skate Or Die* which, even when listened to today, still seems like an impossible accomplishment when looking at the C64's antique sound chip. That said, *Road Rash* wasn't the first time Rob had penned the music for a motorcycle game, as in 1985 he also composed the whimsical tune for Mastertronic's *Action Biker*. This game was released in the UK as *KP Skips Action Biker With Clumsy Colin*, an endorsement from KP the crisp manufacturer, and featured their hapless, motorcycle-crashing Skips mascot in the game.

■ Although *Road Rash: Jailbreak* would go on to declare all-out war with cattle prods and nunchaku, *Road Rash*'s original weapon of choice was the bat. With a well-timed punch, your rasher would shout 'yeah!' and steal it off an unsuspecting opponent, ready for some swift revenge.



for the NES to handle so I adapted it for the Mega Drive, creating a super-fast scaling algorithm that allowed several scaled sprite images in addition to the road effect."

Indeed, playing *Road Rash* today, it's noticeable how similar the pseudo 3D is to *Super Mario Kart* and *F-Zero* on the Mode 7-empowered SNES, a comparison which Mey supports. "My effect was exactly like Mode 7, except there was no rotating around the Z-axis. While optimizing the code I figured out that the interrupts I used to set scale per scan line were using about 60 per cent of the CPU, and, at the time, Edwin Reich was working on a true 3D version of *Blockout* for the Mega Drive, so we adapted the 3D technology for *Road Rash*. We were able to render all the detail for the road, including the dashed lines. It was all smoke and mirrors but it was an actual 3D rendering."

But despite his skill for wrangling performance out of the Mega Drive, Mey's scaling effect would need an equally impressive concept if it was to go any further, and so after showing his work to his EA colleagues, Mey began a turbulent working relationship with

THE EFFECT WAS EXACTLY LIKE MODE 7, BUT WITH NO ROTATING AROUND THE Z-AXIS

Road Rash's co-creator Randall Breen. "Randy proposed a café style American Motorcycle Association-licensed motorcycle racer, and it was this combination of my technology and Randy's idea which formed the basis of *Road Rash*. Funnily enough, *Road Rash* was the working title from day one."

So, with the *Road Rash* project underway, the team worked feverishly to make a demo that would be showcased at the 1990 Consumer Electronics Show. However, despite a strong start, Mey had his concerns. "The problem was the very tame, almost Disney-like view of the AMA, and Randy's desire to make it a 'go anywhere'-style game. This just didn't work on a console that was an adaptation of the Sega System 16 arcade board. We ended up calling the game 'Randy's Sunday Ride' behind his back. We all knew *Road Rash* needed more balls to sell than a simulation of someone following the speed limit."



■■■ AS PREDICTED, THE early prototype of *Road Rash* "bombed" at CES 1990, and so, desperate to steer the *Road Rash* project in a different direction, Mey decided to take matters into his own hands. "*Road Rash* was going to miss Christmas 1990, so the team was given an additional six months to sort it out. I begged Richard Hilleman to give me creative control on the gameplay and he agreed, with Randy limited to everything but gameplay. I put in the cops, kicks, clubs and punches and Dan Geisler did a great job on the physics with radical crashes."

It was at this critical stage that *Road Rash* shifted from being a forgettable *Super Hang-On* clone and began to evolve into the spectacle of two-wheeled violence that we all know and love. "I told Richard I wanted to make the game kick ass and that is why I was given some control. Randy may have disagreed on the violence, but EA had no problem with it as they're really good at identifying problems before they make it into a game. We then had brainstorming sessions, as I believe in getting as much input as possible while designing. Dan and I worked on the fighting system with a 'no projectiles' rule, as they're a major problem in engines that run based on the frame rate. It was truly a group effort."

This switch to what Mey describes as a "hardcore bash-'em-up" meant *Road Rash* wasn't eligible for licensing support from the major motorcycle manufacturers, and so with Shuriken, Panda, Kamakazi and Diablo standing in for Suzuki, Honda, Kawasaki and Ducati, the *Road Rash* team created eight motorbikes which ranged from the weedy Shuriken 400 to the beastly Diablo 1000. But rather than build upon guesswork, some of the team had real-life riding experience. "I rode a Yamaha XJ650 Seca and had a dirt bike I used to race in motocross," says Mey. "Dan had a Harley and I think one of the female artists had a crotch rocket. EA also borrowed a race-ready Ducati on the promise that only a pro would ride it. Randy took the bike for a ride and totalled it. He gave himself literal road rash and hobbled around for a bit, while EA had to pay around $100,000 for the bike because the insurance only covered professional racers."



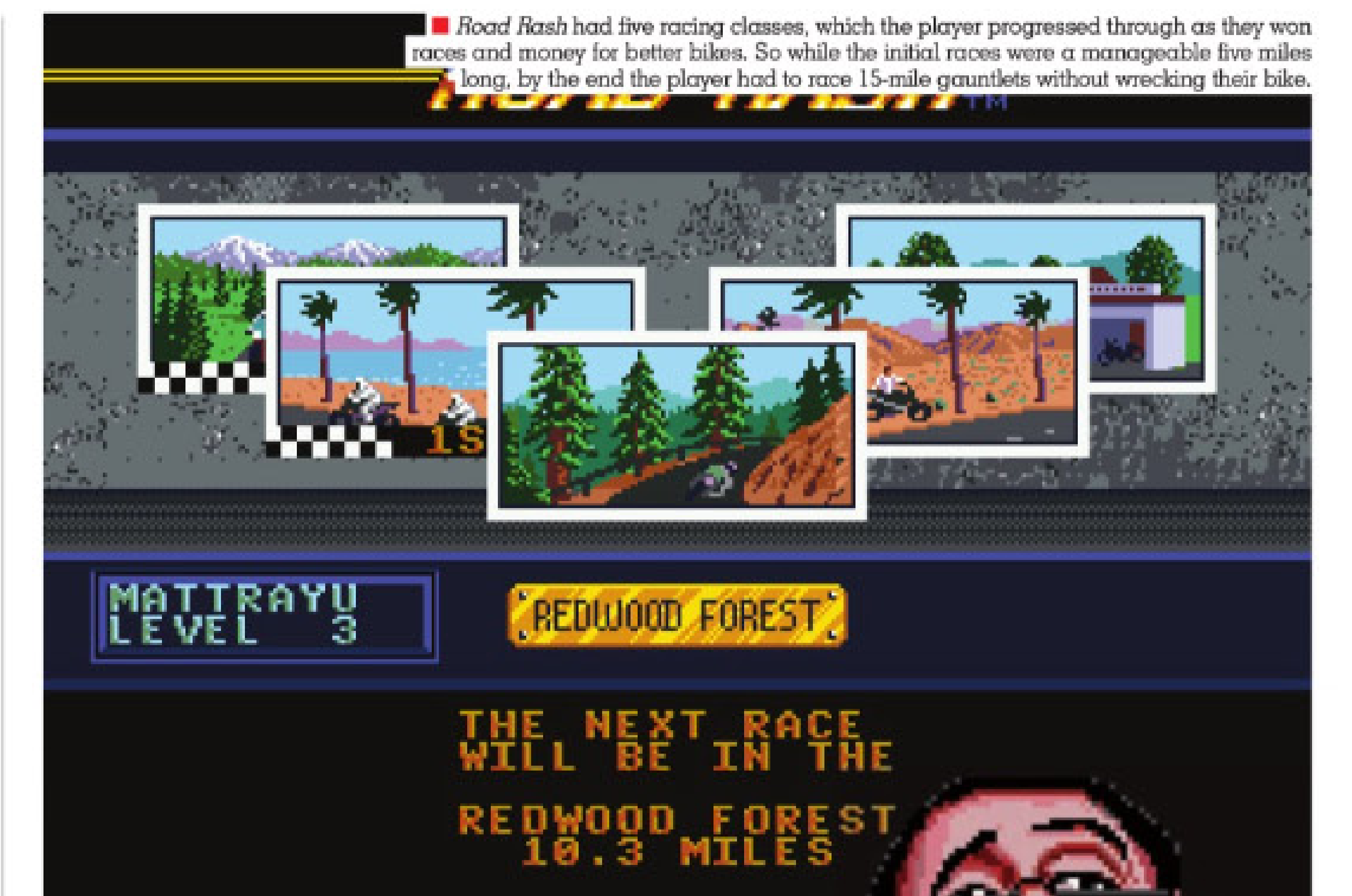
CARL MEY
Technical Director

Breen was responsible for *Road Rash*'s evocative Californian setting, which spanned five roads including Sierra Nevada, Redwood Forest and Palm Desert. "They were all roads that Randy rode his motorcycle on and were modelled after places like Skyline Drive. The modelling was done by Domonique Philipine and his crew on a MAC using Bézier curves. They were very easy to work with and did a great job. They never got any credit but I worked with them on a part of the road that made some players puke from motion sickness, and after watching one of the executive's kids barf on an open night, I yelled out 'great, I've finally made a game that makes people puke!'"

Although no member of **games™** has ever emptied the contents of their stomach by taking a virtual corner too fast, *Road Rash* was one of the most visually impressive racing games available on a home console system at the time. Mey explains the effect on the player: "Videogames are a mind game. In design I studied the effects of music on the heart while generating adrenalin, and also the ability of the beat to affect the player's heart rate. I also learned about the suspension of disbelief and how games are tamed down to eliminate motion sickness. I know a lot about this because I worked on [the unreleased] Sega VR."

■■■ IN THE SPRING of 1991, *Road Rash* was finally released to an audience of astonished gamers previously weaned on the more pedestrian thrills of *Excitebike* and *Hang-On*. Placing first was still the order of the day, but *Road Rash* was less about hitting the apex and more about hitting the competition – preferably full pelt in the face with a sturdy CONTINUED >.

■ *Road Rash* had five racing classes, which the player progressed through as they won races and money for better bikes. So while the initial races were a manageable five miles long, by the end the player had to race 15-mile gauntlets without wrecking their bike.









>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Sega's 1985 *Hang-On* was the first game that deserved to be called a motorcycle racer, and the first full-body-controlled arcade game.



Although it lost out to *Burnout 2*, Acclaim's last-gen bike title *Speed Kings* carries an uncanny resemblance to *Road Rash*.



WHAT THEY SAID...



You'll never believe that you just flew through the air at over 100mph landing on the hapless corpse of a very unfortunate fellow rider! That's another thing that makes Road Rash so good.

Mean Machines, Issue 12



nightstick. And if that wasn't extreme enough, you also had to avoid crashing into cars, colliding with the local wildlife and, most importantly, not being run down and booked by the cops.

It was clear that the development of *Road Rash* had been a trying experience for Mey, but despite the hardships he was nonetheless proud of what he'd helped to achieve. "Everyone was focussed on making *Road Rash* the best game possible, and it was the first game I worked on that I had fun playing after it shipped. I got kudos from everyone I knew and met, and I've been asked for my autograph, even by co-workers as late as 2007. I'm constantly thanked by players for the enjoyment they had playing the game and, to me, that's worth more than the money. I got into the industry to make products that would have a positive impact. The alternative was creating missile guidance systems."

However, if you dig out your special EA-designed cartridge today, give it a blow and then stick it in your Mega Drive, there's one glaring omission from the original formula, which seems baffling when compared to any other game in the *Road Rash* series. And that's the lack of simultaneous multiplayer. We asked Mey to explain. "At the time, it wasn't possible given the road effect and CPU power. We could've done it eventually, but the game showed really well at the next CES and we all knew we had a big hit on our hands. The [cancelled] SNES version was focussed on the two-player view, and Randy dressed it up to look like there was overlap, but the split screen was based on the fact that there could be no overlap."

So it seems, throughout *Road Rash*'s 14-month development cycle, the most explosive part of the process was Mey and Breen's tempestuous relationship, something which Mey feels partly responsible for. "The relationship was strained from the beginning because it was Randy's first project as a Producer. I had far more product knowledge than he did and I had no time to help train him. It wasn't Randy I had a problem with per se, it was more that I'd been spoiled working with the best, i.e. Rich Hilleman and Don Traeger. I'm not sure what Randy made of me but at times I was very obnoxious."

But rather than ending on good terms with a friendly handshake and an 'oh well, at least we got there,' Mey's working relationship with Breen took one final turn for the worse over a conflict of accreditation. "Randy ultimately shafted me in the credits. He took my name off the box and put his on. Company policy was that producers do not get credit on the box, and the whole fiasco led to EA eliminating box-printed credits. Breen's AMA version of *Road Rash* was a simulator with zero gameplay, whereas I added virtually all the gameplay elements. I focussed on a great product more than personal issues, but it was getting screwed in the credits and my bonus that really pissed me off. Ultimately, Randy was promoted and not reprimanded, and unfortunately this was part of the political climate that got in the way of a great product."

> **BREEN'S AMA VERSION OF ROAD RASH WAS A SIMULATOR WITH ZERO GAMEPLAY**

AS HARD AS this pill was to swallow, Mey's huge contribution to *Road Rash* didn't go unnoticed by his peers, and in 1991 he was presented with EA's in-house 'Fireman of the Year' award. We asked Mey to elaborate on what this intriguing accolade represents. "The award is for the employee that had the most impact on projects in trouble. It was due to the fact that, while I was on *Road Rash*, I was also Technical Director for 30 more projects, both internal and external. Obviously I only got involved when things went wrong, but I became the go-to person for keeping projects from tanking. Richard Hilleman told me that it was really the 'You Need To Get A Life' award because anyone that worked enough hours to be eligible had no personal life. Unfortunately for me, Rich was correct."



Before each race, a screen would pop up with a bit of banter from one of your fellow bikers, or, sometimes, one of the cops. Viper and Sergio appeared in all the classes, although we always felt a bit guilty when knocking biker chick Natasha off her steed.



The balance between saving money to buy a faster bike and holding on enough to repair your newly-purchased ride (which you inevitably couldn't control yet) could be agonising.

It seems strange, then, that after Mey's integral role in *Road Rash*'s success, EA's upper management wasn't too keen on putting him in charge of a lucrative follow-up. Indeed, Mey's words paint a very different scenario. "As the number one candidate for becoming the director of technology, I was pulled away from direct involvement in any project. I still managed them, but I was more involved in new technology. EA was a political nightmare. As such, I had limited involvement in *Road Rash II*, as I left to work for Sega before the game was finished. The rule is that people did not get credit unless they were on the project to the end. I figure the real deal is the original, and after that it's just adding features to an already-hit game."

AFTER *ROAD RASH*, Mey went on to work in various capacities for a range of companies including Sega and Namco, amassing an impressive CV that includes designing the architecture for the Sega 32X and cramming the first FMV onto an N64 cartridge. But since leaving his last post at Global VR in 2008, he has decided to go solo. "I recently formed Carl Mey LLC so I can create products that are just too innovative for a large corporation. My mission statement is to make great games, have a blast doing it and make a ton of money. I got the idea when I was at Sega and I was supposed to talk John Carmack into making *Doom* an exclusive for the Mega Drive. But he told me that large corporations make games that are too politically correct, and that he'd be back after his game was popular on the PC and do a non-exclusive with Sega, Nintendo or whoever. He was right. That guy was the smartest person I ever met in the industry."

Whether Mey can pull off a Carmack remains to be seen, but there's no denying the fact that *Road Rash* became one of the most successful series on the Mega Drive, with two excellent sequels as well as a mixed bag of follow-ups on the 3DO, N64 and PSOne. But when asked if he'd make another motorcycle game, he doesn't seem too enthusiastic. "I have no plans for a game with only motorcycles in it, but I do have a concept that involves driving. It's definitely not a simulation because, to me, one thing is clear... reality sucks, so why make a game that simulates real-life?"

But rather than end on a negative we'll finish, appropriately enough, with Mey's closing comment. "While making *Road Rash*, I had no idea people would still be talking about it nearly 20 years later. It was a privilege to work on. Most people work a lifetime with little or no recognition, but it didn't take a name on a box to get more recognition than I ever imagined possible."



Super Nintendon't

READING AN OLD extract from an ancient issue of *Nintendo Magazine System*, we came across this fascinating snippet. "Word reaches us that Electronic Arts are currently considering releasing *Road Rash* for the Super NES. Although the game isn't on their current 1993 release schedule, we have heard that development ideas are currently doing the rounds and ideas are being mooted to make the most of the machine's advantages over the Mega Drive – faster 3D, perhaps?"

Intrigued, we asked Mey for the inside scoop on the *Road Rash* port that never surfaced. "So far as the SNES version, I recall major technical problems. The SNES was far less powerful than the Mega Drive. The Mega Drive had a 16-bit data bus, while the SNES had an 8-bit data bus. On the SNES, all data access was around half the speed of the Mega Drive. And by the way, the term 'Blast Processing' was a joke told by Mike Latham at Sega of America."

Blimey, games™ isn't sure it would have the balls to call the SNES "far less powerful" than the Mega Drive, but in terms of *Road Rash* lore, this is an interesting insight nonetheless.



TALES OF TRAVELLERS TALES

Cheshire-based developer Travellers Tales may now be best known for its slew of Lego-themed videogames, but to retro gamers it will always be remembered for a pair of Saturn-based Sonic The Hedgehog titles developed in close collaboration with Sega. **games™** talks to the developer's founders to find out exactly how this partnership came to pass

ALTHOUGH MANY GAMERS reached fever pitch over Sega's recently announced *Sonic the Hedgehog 4*, a great deal of scepticism remains from retro fans who have had their fingers burned by the series too many times. While it's refreshing to see *Sonic Rush* developer Dimps taking the franchise back to a more digestible 2D format, memories of the 2006 reboot and *Sonic Unleashed* still linger in the mind. When it comes to making a smooth transition into 3D, *Mario 64* is unquestionably the first great example of how to do it correctly. Miyamoto and company perfectly retained the key elements that made the older titles so appealing, while adding a fresh spin on the formula. It was no mean feat, and Sonic Team simply hasn't enjoyed the same success. The developer has grown increasingly red-faced over broken promises to return to the series' roots and failures to make amends for past mistakes.

As Sega's other recent misfire *Golden Axe: Beast Rider* proved, developers can't shoe-horn an old formula into a modern paradigm and expect it to be a success. Regardless of how much currency a classic series still holds with nostalgic gamers, this is not an indicator of guaranteed sales. It's the common case of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, and many publishers fall into the same trap, upsetting the fanbase and critics in the process. No matter how much developers try, Sonic simply doesn't want to exist comfortably in the third dimension. In an attempt to understand the conundrum, **games™** caught up with the first developer tasked with attempting the impossible, Cheshire-based studio Traveller's Tales.

Established in 1990, the developer quickly worked alongside several big name publishers, including Psygnosis and Disney. Critically acclaimed Mega Drive titles such as *Mickey Mania* and *Dizzy*-inspired puzzler *Puggsy* would give the CONTINUED >.

Musical Sound Shower

WHILE *SONIC R* pushed the Saturn to its limit, it is perhaps best remembered for its soundtrack. Written by award-winning game composer Richard Jacques and sung by British backing vocalist TJ Davis, Sega saw fit to make the game disc playable in standard CD players, paving the way for the soundtrack to gain a cult following online. "We were very wary of the 'singing' when we first heard it, so we certainly wanted the instrumental-only option to go in the final game," Burton confesses, "although, looking back now, I absolutely love the vocal version of the songs – I have them all on my iPod!" Jacques's tracks have proved consistently popular, with 'Super Sonic Racing' and 'Can You Feel The Sunshine?' since reappearing in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* and *Sonic And Sega All-Stars Racing* respectively.

studio significant pulling power. By 1996, the launch of the Saturn spurred the team to think beyond the 16-bit era and weigh up its prospects. "We had started work on the PlayStation and we also wanted to work on the Sega Saturn" explains Jon Burton, founder of Traveller's Tales. "Sega actually approached us and said they would love to work with us, but wanted us to make a 16-bit game for them. We said no, we want to work on the next-generation of hardware. They said it would be a *Sonic* game, we said 'Oh, *that* 16-bit game, no problem!' So they pitched to us. We're very lucky; in the 35-plus games we've made, we've only had to pitch three times – every other time the publisher has approached us."

The game in question was *Sonic 3D*, Sega's first attempt at bringing their mascot up to speed with a rapidly changing industry. It's something of an oddity in that it used an isometric viewpoint instead of a fully three-dimensional world, yet at the time it blew a lot of gamers away. With the Mega Drive's technical limitations in mind, Traveller's Tales had to realign their approach to get the most out of it. Jon continues, "We had to develop a completely new way of using the Mega Drive. We employed every hardware trick in the book and invented several new ones. Every graphic and animation in the game was 3D-rendered using a program called SoftImage, and we had to develop complex colour reduction tools to allow them to still look good in 16 colours, and so on." Although it was an enjoyable and technically impressive title in its own right, the switch in perspective left *Sonic 3D* feeling distanced from the series.

While the game was visually appealing, particularly the beautifully rendered intro sequence and bonus rounds, the graphical sheen could not distract gamers from the lack of blistering speed that *Sonic* had become renowned for. Classic elements such as speed ramps and loop-de-loops remained, but with a drastically reduced speed limit. Rather than a typical race-against-the-clock format, players were tasked with rescuing Flickies, small birds trapped inside Robotnik's robotic minions. By delivering a certain number of rescued birds to a ring gate, Sonic would be granted passage to the next stage or boss fight. It was a simple format, but one that provided a real challenge across several colourful and brilliantly realised zones.

BURTON EXPLAINS the painstaking process of creating such a powerful title on what was fast becoming dated technology, "The fact it was in 3D added a huge level of complexity to every aspect of the game. For instance, with every other game you would store all the graphics for a level in something called Video Ram (VRAM), but because of the complexity of the graphics needed we had to store them in the ROM and download every frame in VRAM for every graphic used. This allowed us to quadruple the amount of graphics we could put on screen. As for Sonic himself, all his animations were stored in a very compressed format and then decompressed frame-by-frame so we could successfully store all the 3D angles of his animations. The finished game matched the initial design very well. The only thing we dropped was split-screen two-player, which we had working but we would have had to compromise the graphical standard to include in the final release."

WE HAD TO DEVELOP A COMPLETELY NEW WAY OF USING THE MEGA DRIVE

It may be 15 years old, but even then *Sonic 3D* signalled a significant change in the direction of the series. Speed was no longer the unique selling point, instead replaced with rescuing captive Flickies. Regardless, the title was a functional, well-presented addition to the series that dodged a lot of the camera, setting and control issues present in *Sonic Adventure*, the 2006 reboot and *Unleashed*. Sega is not alone in this trend, with Capcom sequels *Bionic Commando* and *Final Fight: Streetwise* also guilty. These are two fine examples of colourful, enjoyable titles that have been repackaged as dark and gritty to pander to the current generation. The perfectly honed gameplay of both original titles simply did not translate into the third dimension, and left the modern re-hashes feeling almost alien by comparison.



One part *Marble Madness*, one part *Sonic The Hedgehog* – *Sonic 3D* in a nutshell.





JUST A YEAR after *Sonic 3D* saw a release, Traveller's Tales developed *Sonic R* for Saturn. Once again, the formula was far removed from the side-scrolling platformers of old. Remarkably, although it was a racing title, the developer still managed to retain some essence of the 16-bit series, rooting the game in the world of Mobius and keeping the same sense of speed *Sonic* was known for. "We were making *Formula 1* for Sega on the Saturn, while a team in the US was making the first true-3D *Sonic* game," reflects Burton (see 'Cancelled… to the X-treme'). "It wasn't going well, so Sega suggested that we turn the *Formula 1* game into a *Sonic* title. We had only just started the *Formula 1* game – we'd done a basic track and 3D object renderer – so we swapped it to *Sonic R*, hence the racing theme. We only had six months to get it done, having never used the Saturn before, so that was a tough deadline."

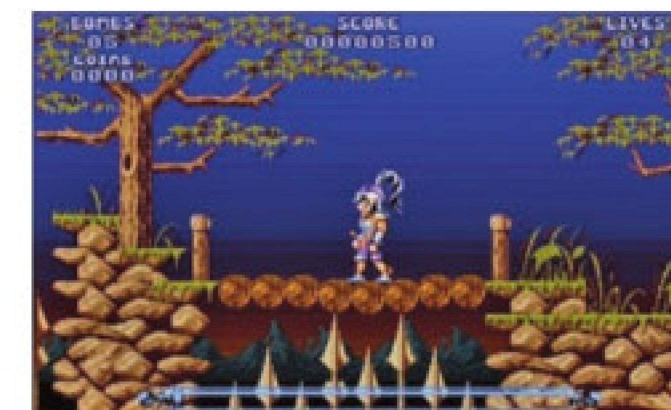
Burton continues, "The Saturn was a bag of bits in terms of chips and processors. It had a main processor, an identical 'slave' processor, a playfield chip – which was a lot like a SNES with playfields and a 3D-style, Mode 7-type mode - and a polygon render chip. The latter was fairly inefficient compared to the PSX, as it overdrew pixels in a single polygon draw, meaning it wasn't as fast, and you couldn't do transparencies on a polygon. This was a significant limitation. We wrote all our own tools for *Sonic R*, with the exception of Softimage, which we used to build all the models and tracks."

The game brought together several elements from the classic series, such as speed pads and elemental shields that allowed players to skim across water or attract rings like a magnet. Unlike *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, competitors such as Sonic, Tails and Knuckles competed on foot and could make use of their unique abilities to get an edge over the competition. Random environmental shifts such as rain and snow could also alter each of the five tracks without warning, forcing players to shift their racing lines to maintain a lead.

Traveller's Tales has perhaps come closest to successfully translating the *Sonic* formula into 3D. Neither *Sonic 3D* nor *Sonic R* may have dated well, but they at least did an admirable job of implementing the notoriously tricky 3D camera. "*Sonic 3D* is now over 15 years old: doesn't time fly? The Temptation, and we fell for it in some of our games, was CONTINUED >.

Early Years

Five Traveller's Tales games that came before Sonic 3D



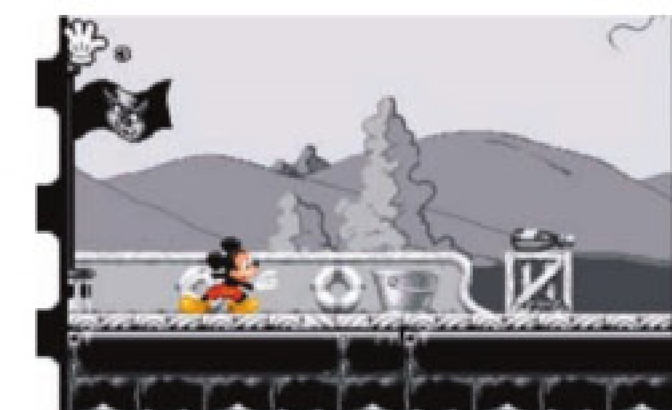
LEANDER – Amiga (1990)
Although Electronic Arts ported *Leander* to the Mega Drive a year later as *Legend Of Galahad*, the original game from Traveller's Tales was a neat mix of side-scrolling platforming and fantasy combat. Best described as *Rastan*-meets-*Shadow Of The Beast*, *Leander* was a strong start for the young developer. Keep an eye out for a cameo from the *Killing Game Show* robot in the final stage.



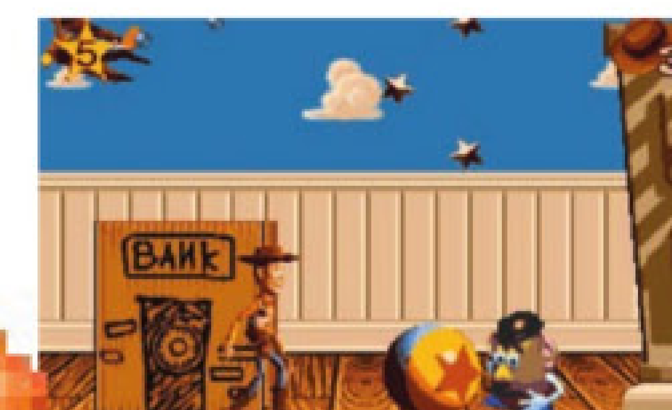
BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA – Mega Drive, SNES (1992)
The team's first licensed title, *Dracula* was released alongside the Keanu Reeves and Gary Oldman horror flick. While the film went on to win academy awards, the game fared worse, with many players put off by the harsh difficulty and unpredictable enemies. While it's not their best effort, the skill of Traveller's Tales was evident in its visual trickery, for which the studio would become renowned.



PUGGSY – Mega Drive, Amiga (1993)
Inspired by The Oliver Twins' *Dizzy* series, *Puggsy*'s blend of platforming and item-based puzzles proved a hit with gamers. The story of a small alien overcoming a slew of weird challenges to get back to his home world could have sustained several sequels. Sadly, a second game never materialised. Interestingly, *Puggsy* was one of the first cartridge titles to feature in-built piracy measures that scolded anyone playing an illegal copy.



MICKEY MANIA – Mega Drive, SNES (1994)
Much like Warren Spector's forthcoming *Epic Mickey*, this reverent title runs amok with Disney history. Players had to guide Mickey through time to meet with his past iterations. From his 1928 debut in *Steamboat Willie* to 1990 feature film *The Prince and the Pauper*, there was a sweet nostalgia to this title that still warms the heart today.



TOY STORY – Mega Drive (1996)
While this Disney-Pixar tie-in was released in the same year as *Sonic 3D*, it has to be applauded for its visuals. Traveller's Tales littered each stage with 3D shapes, detailed textures and fluid animation. For the time, this was a perfect showcase of 16-bit power at work, and a fitting end to the developers' short but impressive Mega Drive library.

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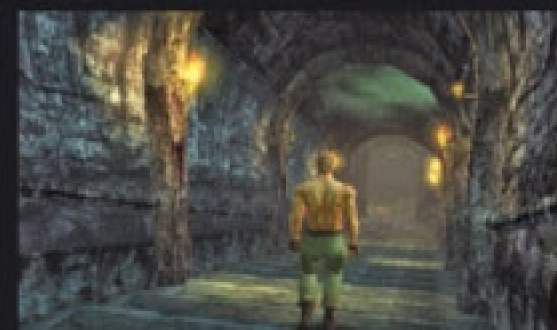
Five classic series that made a bumpy leap into 3D

CASTLEVANIA – N64 (1999)



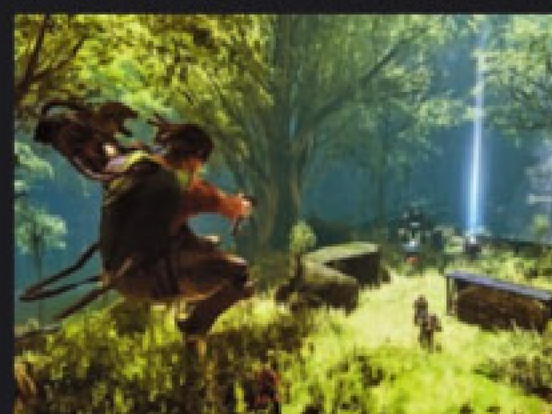
AS MUCH as Konami tries, 3D *Castlevania* titles have always fallen way below expectation. The murky textures and uninspiring locales of the Nintendo 64 effort made it a sour experience for many long-serving fans of the series, while subsequent PS2 efforts only prolonged the agony. Perhaps Hideo Kojima can work his magic and make amends with the forthcoming *Lords Of Shadow*.

ALTERED BEAST – PS2 (2005)



SEGA'S STRATEGY to revitalise its classic back-catalogue meant nostalgic gamers were left reeling by this shoddy modern update. The developers took the title literally, altering the classic side scrolling beat-'em-up formula beyond all recognition. With a modern twist, cut-and-paste lead character and shocking visuals, this is up there with the worst of them.

BIONIC COMMANDO – Xbox 360, PS3 (2009)



WHILE NOT A terrible game by any measure, this sequel removed the colour and character of the 1987 original and replaced it with a murky palette and a ludicrous plot. Where the original placed Nathan's bionic arm movement as the selling point, the update combined shooting and swinging to create something new and original. New and original wasn't what most people wanted from a retro update, however, and Grin's game was met with mixed reviews.

EARTHWORM JIM 3D – N64 (1999)



SHINY ENTERTAINMENT'S classic Mega Drive titles are long overdue another modern sequel, but it's easy to see why developers may be cautious after this lacklustre effort from VIS Entertainment. While the game showed promise, it suffered a great deal in development hell, resulting in a buggy and generic experience. While the zany humour and ludicrous ensemble cast remained, the game simply couldn't stack up against *Super Mario 64* or *Banjo-Kazooie*.

CONTRA: LEGACY OF WAR – PSOne (1997)



DEVELOPER APPALOOSA really dropped the ball with its poor attempt at modernising the *Contra* series. Gone was the precise and intense platforming experience of its predecessors, replaced with a clumsy isometric viewpoint and bland visuals. Amazingly, the developer would sink to deeper lows with the follow-up, *C: The Contra Adventure*. It was only with *Contra 4* on DS that Konami remembered what made the series so great.



Supporting characters like Tails and Knuckles unlocked bonus stages if players had enough rings.

to let the player control the camera. This has two problems; first, it's a whole other analogue input to worry about and, second, it is very hard to present obstacles and enemies to the player in a fun and consistent way, especially if the player might well be looking in completely the wrong direction at the time. If you play our *Lego* series of games, we control the camera for you and it allows for a much more consistent experience. You should always know what you should be doing and where you should be going next. In its 2D form, *Sonic* is played at such speed and with such focus that allowing 360-degree control of cameras just wasn't the right move, but everyone else – particularly *Mario* – was doing it, so Sega followed. Also, I don't think people realised how beautifully clever - due to masses of hidden complexity - the *Mario* cameras were, and so a lot of bad cameras made it into games as people learned otherwise."

WHILE BOTH titles felt canon, they sacrificed speed in the name of graphical sheen, particularly *Sonic R*, which was developed with the limitations of Saturn hardware in mind. In order to create a true sense of speed, Traveller's Tales had to rely on a great deal of visual trickery.

"You can play with the camera 'fisheye' to enhance the feeling of speed in a 3D title" explains Burton. "You see it a lot in racing games when you hit boost and the stuff in the distance seems to shrink and stretch. The downside is the character or car you are playing as tends to start looking distorted, so it's a balance. The main limitation of the Saturn was how far you could draw into the distance. Most Saturn games had bad pop-up because of the lack of polygon fading, but we found a way of abusing the hardware on *Sonic R* to allow us to fade our polys out onto a nice sky map, which really helped."

Despite gaining a strong cult following and a 2005 re-release as part of the PS2 *Sonic Gems Collection*, a sequel to *Sonic R* never materialised. "We talked about it, but nothing came of it." Burton recalls. "The Saturn wasn't a huge success as a console, and *Sonic R* was one of our lowest-ever-selling titles, so we were moving more onto the Sony Playstation. Also, I think Sonic Team was working on the *Sonic* title for the Dreamcast as part of the hardware launch, so having a team in Japan to work on early versions of the hardware would have been essential." So with the Saturn facing an unfortunate decline in both sales and fans, and the Dreamcast on the horizon, the developer looked to new opportunities within the industry.

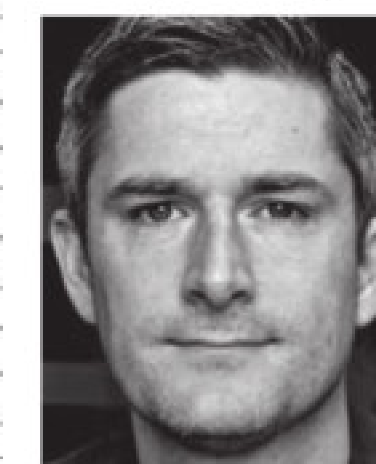
"Environmental effects switched up the gameplay at random in Sonic R."



SEGA SUGGESTED THAT WE TURN THE FORMULA 1 GAME INTO A SONIC TITLE

Using its close relationships with licensees such as Disney and Pixar, the studio would go on to create a slew of movie titles that bucked the trend of the lazy tie-in. Aimed squarely at the children's market, bright and colourful games like *Finding Nemo* and *The Chronicles Of Narnia* captivated young gamers everywhere and allowed the developer to carve out a perfect niche.

IN 2005, a merger between Traveller's Tales and publisher Giant Interactive would see the duo operate under the new name of TT Games. Shortly after, the phenomenon that is *Lego Star Wars* would be born, amassing a grand total of 5 million copies sold across multiple formats. The runaway success of the game would cement the developer's position as a force to be reckoned with, not just in the UK sector but also on a global scale. Perhaps the biggest success of this particular game is that it appealed to both children and the adult gamers with fond memories of the movie series, something that is always incredibly bankable. Following a few years of success with *Lego Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*, Warner Bros. snapped up TT Games in 2007. The move led to the development of *Lego Batman* and the assured mega-hit *Lego Harry Potter: Years 1-4*, with a third *Star Wars* tie-in not too far behind. With rumours currently circulating online regarding a *Lego Lord Of The Rings* crossover, the developer's plastic empire looks set to expand even further in the near future.



JON BURTON
Founder

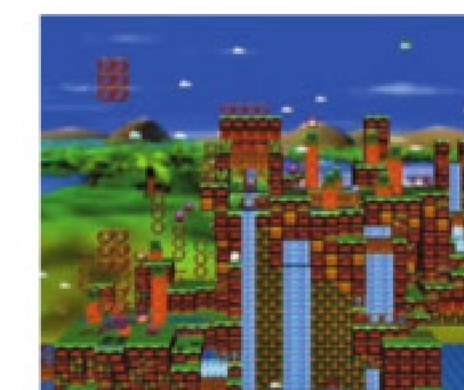
At present, the studio has amassed a whopping 60 million game sales since it was formed in 1990, as well as scooping two BAFTA awards; one for *Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy*, and Children's Videogame of the Year for *Lego Batman*. It has almost become a regular event for gamers across the world to speculate which franchise will be up next for the plastic treatment. While the fantastical notions of *Lego Call Of Duty* or *Lego Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* may seem a tad far-fetched, the teams to have the ability to make any possibility a reality.

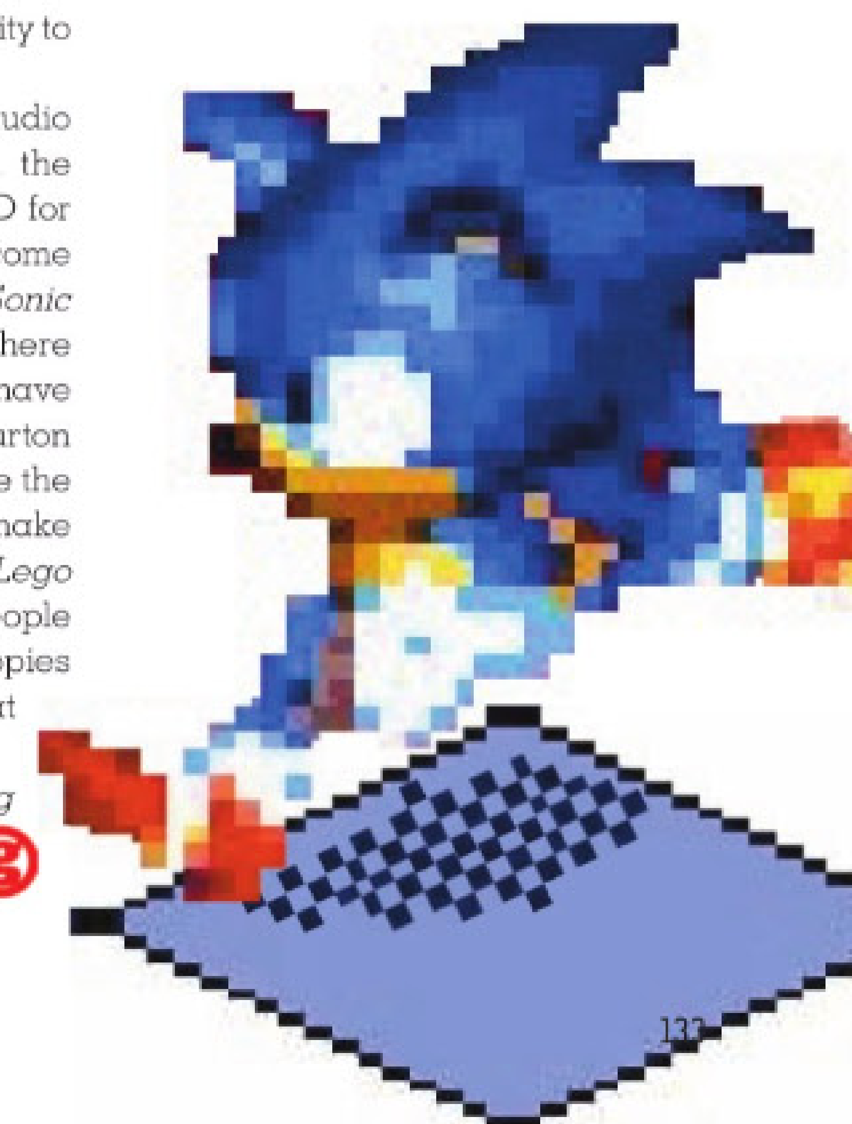
After all, this is a development studio that was brave enough to take on the challenge of translating *Sonic* into 3D for the first time. Perhaps things will come full circle and we may see another *Sonic* title developed by TT Games somewhere down the line – stranger things have definitely happened. On that note, Burton concludes: "If we were asked to create the next fully-3D *Sonic* title, we would make it much more along the lines of our *Lego* titles, with very controlled cameras. People like the *Lego* games we make – with 30 million copies of that series sold to date – so we would apply that formula to *Sonic*. Sega, if you're reading..."

So there you have it; *Lego Sonic The Hedgehog* could conceivably happen at some point in the years to come. You read it here first.

Cancelled to the X-treme

THE CANCELLED *Sonic* game Burton refers to is the ill-fated Saturn project *Sonic X-treme*. First billed for faltering 32X peripheral then the struggling Saturn, the title experienced a serious case of development hell until it was officially cancelled in 1997. The legacy of the project continues to live on, shrouded in mystery and kept alive by a number of passionate fan communities. Several tribute games are currently in development, making use of *Sonic X-treme* sprites and its odd fisheye camera viewpoint. Rare gameplay footage from E3 1996 still exists on the net, and shows off some rather interesting physics. It's an odd taster of what could have been.









BEST BOSS

MARVEL VS CAPCOM Arcade [Capcom] 1998

■ If you had to pick one character that epitomised everything that was wrong with Marvel comics in the Nineties then you couldn't go far wrong with Onslaught. A gestalt manifestation of the collective unconscious of Professor X and the son of Mr Fantastic, he was less a character and more a cipher, used as an excuse to unite the whole Marvel universe under one story arc and force fans to buy hundreds of comics per month. There was one thing Onslaught was good for, though – huge in size and massively overpowered, he made the perfect boss in a Capcom fighting game. A series of cheap moves and unblockable attacks complemented his screen-filling bulk in all the most annoying ways. But, boy, did he look impressive.



BEHIND THE SCENES

FINAL FANTASY IV

Despite being the fourth game in the series, Final Fantasy IV was only just the beginning of Square's rise to JRPG domination. Original designer Takashi Tokita explains the making of a genre masterpiece



Released: 1991
Format: SNES
Publisher: Square
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:

Hironobu Sakaguchi
Director

Takashi Tokita
Lead Designer

Yoshitaka Amano
Character Designer

Nobuo Uematsu
Composer



WITH FOURTEEN MAIN entries, plus countless sequels and spin-offs, which edition of *Final Fantasy* can be considered the most important? The first is a strong contender, since the series simply wouldn't exist without it. *Final Fantasy VII* is obviously important for catapulting the series into the modern age and introducing the genre to a global audience. But, for our money, it's 1991's *Final Fantasy IV* that may well be the defining moment in the franchise's evolution. It was the first to redefine the JRPG as a more linear, story-focussed genre. It introduced the Active Time Battle system, which added new strategies to otherwise standard combat, and went on to dominate the series for many years. And it was the first to put you in control of proper, multi-faceted characters that would actually change as people, shaped by the events of the unfolding narrative.

But enough about *Final Fantasy IV*'s achievements for now. Let's go back to the start and see how this landmark role playing game came to be. The year was 1990 and Square had just shipped *Final Fantasy III* for the Famicom. A young designer named Takashi Tokita, who had started at the company as a programmer on *Rad Racer* before contributing sound effects to *FFIII*, found himself in charge of the series' first Super Famicom entry as lead designer.

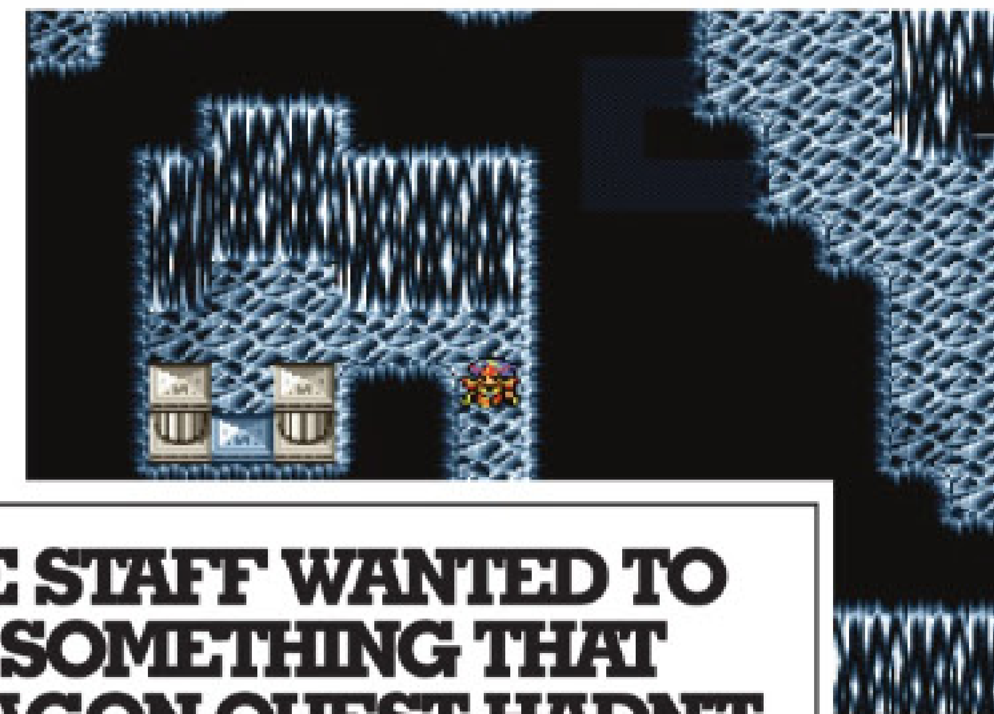
"I guess I did get a credit for the sound effects in *FFIII*, but that wasn't my main job," Tokita clarifies. "I was involved in graphic design, and I was also responsible for jotting down ideas, drawing up images. I was kind of involved in every aspect of it; whenever I had some spare time on my hands I got involved in whatever was available. Up until *Final Fantasy III* I was working as a part-timer at the company; I had joined a theatre troupe and I worked on *FFIII* as a part-time job. But, starting with *Final Fantasy IV*, I got an offer to be a full employee of the CONTINUED >.

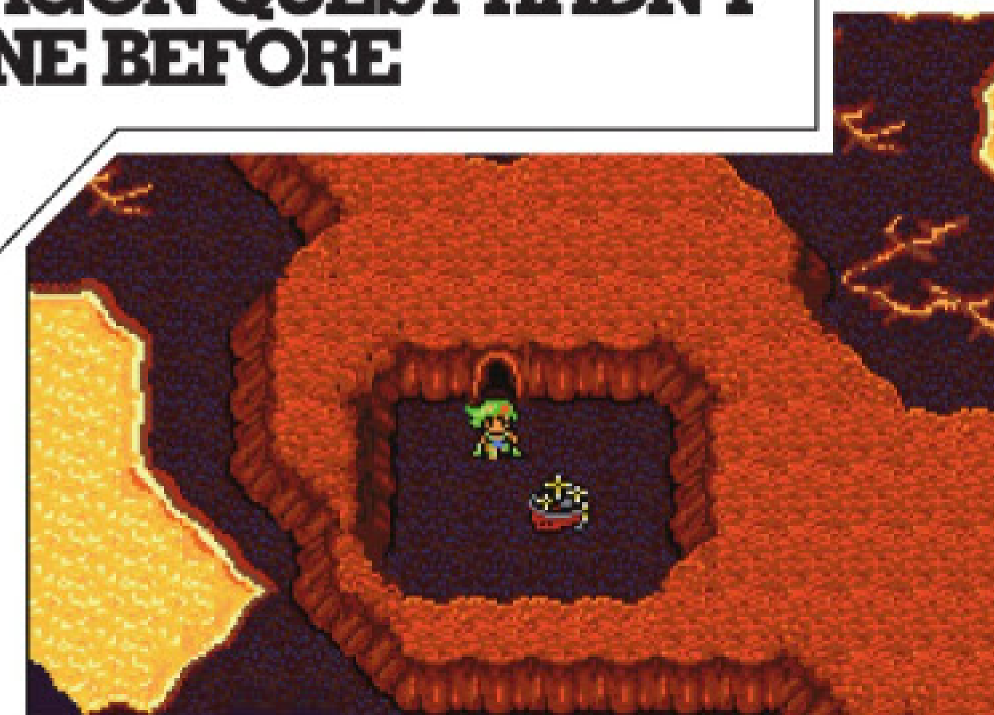
THE STAFF WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT DRAGON QUEST HADN'T DONE BEFORE





The GBA version of *FFIV* had some interesting changes, as Tokita explains. "There was a new feature where you could change up the party with living members. That was something we always wanted to implement."

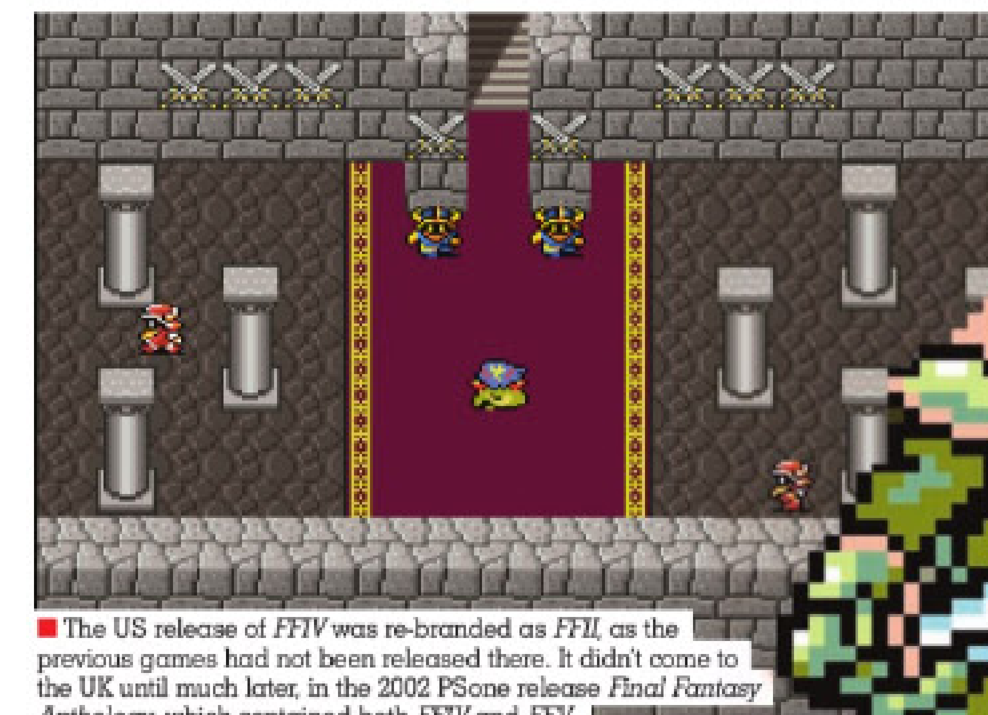










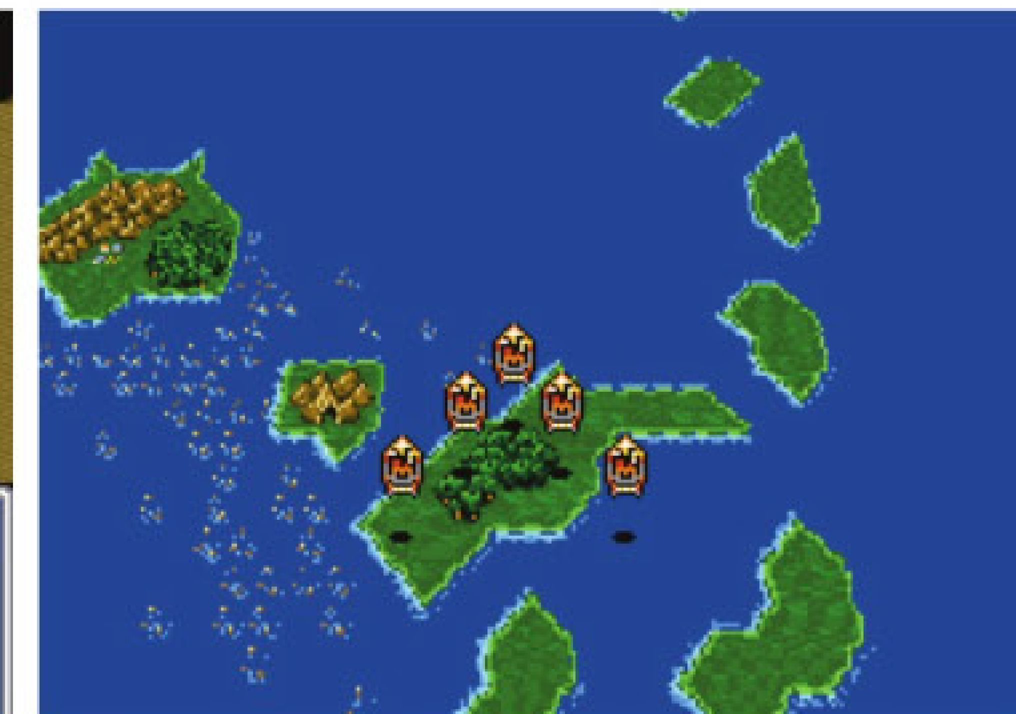


The US release of *FFIV* was re-branded as *FFII*, as the previous games had not been released there. It didn't come to the UK until much later, in the 2002 PSone release *Final Fantasy Anthology*, which contained both *FFIV* and *FFV*.



Tokita has taken many roles in the development of *FFIV*, even including voice acting in the Japanese release of the DS remake.







FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: DIFFERENTCLASS
This one is the oldest *Final Fantasy* I really like. It isn't as dry as previous games, and to me it was the first game to get a bit of character. It's the first great *Final Fantasy* game. I think it laid down the template for all *FF* games structurally up to *IX*.

Posted by: PIOUS THE CHOSEN
Oh, I remember *FFIV*. That's the game where your character sprite goes from super-cool looking black-armoured knight to white-haired ladyboy. Golbez was probably the first distinct villain of the early *Final Fantasy* games, and one of the best too.

Posted by: RADIOFLOYD
FFIV was a great game. I remember quirky things, like doing a side-quest for a spoon which could do 9,000+ damage. And a room in the dwarf castle where you could battle the real game developers.

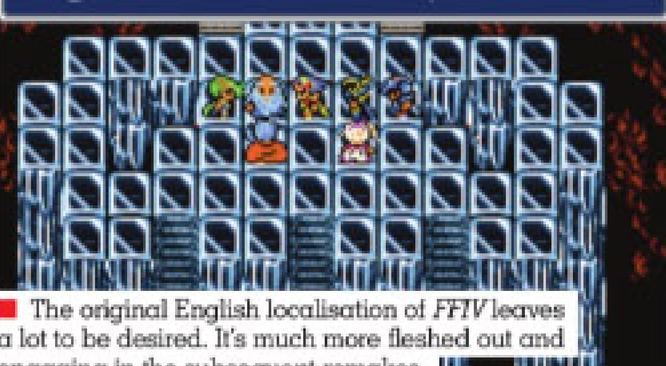
Posted by: BOB SYKO
I really liked the way the cast changed so much throughout the game, and you were always getting people in your party with new moves to try out.

Posted by: MAF-ME-QUICK
FFIV is home to the hardest RPG boss fights I've had. There was one guy who would switch the effects of black and white magic; you had to predict when his turn was and what he would do. And the guy after had a cape where you had to use the steal move to get his cape open. It took me ages to figure that out!

Thar Be Dragons

THE *FINAL Fantasy* series was one of a handful of games responsible for defining what the Japanese RPG would become, but it wasn't the most famous, at least not in its home country. That accolade goes to the phenomenally popular *Dragon Quest*, so we can't help but ask Tokita what he thought of his biggest rival at the time. "There were already existing games like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. *Dragon Quest* was those two games, with a Japanese type of comic style added; they were the origin of Japanese RPGs for the NES. *Dragon Quest II* was the first RPG that I completed. There, I felt the possibilities of storytelling within a game. That's where I started becoming more interested in the RPG genre. There was motivation among the staff to kind of do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done. A lot of the staff had played *Ultima* and *Wizardry* as well, but they really wanted to set out and do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done before."





The original English localisation of *FFIV* leaves a lot to be desired. It's much more fleshed out and engaging in the subsequent remakes.

company, and so I became a game designer and *FFIV* was the first job I worked on full-time. "Back then," Tokita adds, "I was involved in graphics, and then I was given the title of game designer. It was a lot to deal with all of a sudden. I'm kind of surprised that Hironobu Sakaguchi, the director at the time, gave me all that responsibility." The opportunity presented to Tokita couldn't have had more potential. The first three *Final Fantasy* games had all proven hugely popular in Japan, while the US edition of the first game had just been released that year, and *Final Fantasy IV* would be released there as its direct follow-up. Additionally, this was the first game in the series to be developed for Nintendo's new Super Famicom hardware, so the team would be able to create something even more impressive than any previous entry.

"The biggest difference between the Famicom and Super Famicom," says Tokita, "was the memory, where the ROM and CPU both increased. The number of characters that you could push out into the game increased, and the effects that were made possible were expanded. You could get bigger effects. The memory size played a big role in the effects and sound that were possible in *Final Fantasy IV*." These technological advancements enabled Square to create a richer, more detailed world, with characters that had more distinct designs – both essential features for an RPG – and Tokita is quick to praise the role of the Super Famicom's unique visual tricks in *FFIV*'s design. "I guess the two biggest aspects were that the color variations increased with the SNES platform and that it also had Mode 7, which allowed for rotation of the perspective, the world." Which allowed Square to create a vast overworld, which appeared to expand out far over the horizon. "Boy, that takes me back," he adds after recalling memories that have probably laid dormant for the best part of two decades.

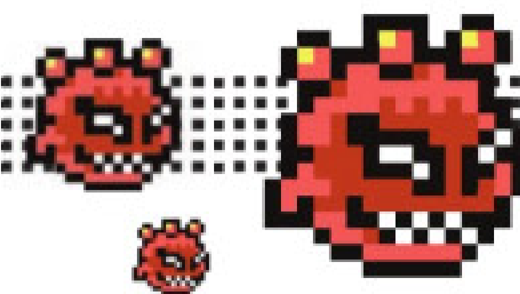
Anyone who's played the original release of *FFIV*, rather than the many remakes that have appeared in recent years, will know that graphics weren't really the game's strong point. It looked more like a slightly more detailed NES game than the big and bold imagery of 1994's *Final Fantasy VI*. Rather, *FFIV*'s emphasis was well and truly on its story and characters, which Tokita personally oversaw with great dedication. "Back in the day, obviously I was involved in the scriptwriting," he confirms. "Connecting the game through the script was my area, that was my job. Without that, and without that pressure, the game wouldn't have been developed, so that was a great experience on my part. It was interesting for me to be able to create the script and be able to bring it all together from the player's standpoint."



"Back then I only went home once a week, so the rent was kind of a waste," he adds with a chuckle. Tokita certainly put in the hours, and it shows all the way through *Final Fantasy IV*. Previous games in the series may have featured story and characters before, but only in the loosest possible sense of the words. Characters were mere archetypes; custom-named by the player and chosen for their class and skills, they were depicted as generic warriors on an even more generic quest. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square introduced a more guided narrative experience in which main character Cecil was anything but one-dimensional. Starting off as a powerful dark knight, Cecil defects from his army after following questionable orders from the king that result in the slaughter of a whole town full of innocent people. From there he embarks on a personal journey that literally transforms him as a character, a quest for redemption that bucked previous RPG trends by portraying an initially flawed hero rather than an idealised one.

THE SNES MEMORY PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN THE EFFECTS AND SOUND THAT WERE POSSIBLE

Tokita acknowledges that RPGs before *FFIV* were mainly about the freedom of open-world exploration and discovery, but that this contributed to an unfocused, sometimes confusing, experience. For *Final Fantasy IV* he was inspired more by the editing of movies, which allowed the team to create a more dramatic tale that frequently escalated in excitement, right up to its incredible finale on the surface of the moon.



Of course, this new emphasis on storytelling had the effect of streamlining the game to the point where exploration was virtually non-existent and customisation was limited to just the equipment of your characters. But *Final Fantasy IV* was certainly not without a sense of strategy. Its most important innovation was the introduction of the Active Time Battle system, which completely revolutionised the way RPG combat functioned. Previous *Final Fantasy* games worked much like the *Dragon Quest* series, in that they were purely turn-based and could become quite tedious in the length of time they took to play. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square tweaked the system so that it was based more on the speed of each character. Commands were still entered through a menu, but would play out almost in real time as characters became ready to perform them. Unlike true turn-based games, this meant that you were constantly engaged by the battles. Get distracted and you could leave yourself open to attack. Fail to input commands quickly and you'd just be wasting valuable time.

The inspiration behind ATB is perhaps the most unusual in game development history. As the story goes, *FFIV*'s planner, Hiroyuki Itoh, got the idea when watching a formula one race, seeing the way some drivers would overtake and even lap their opponents. In *Final Fantasy IV* this translates as the speed of each character relative to both their allies and enemies. The fastest characters are often able to act twice as often as the slower ones, while big spells can take ages to cast, forcing the mages to effectively duck out of battle for several seconds. It's a masterstroke that forces you to really consider the properties of your party and make careful decisions, weighing time spent against the potential damage dealt.



TAKASHI TOKITA
Lead Designer

While sheer inspiration can be credited for some of these accomplishments, *Final Fantasy IV*, like most great games, was made through great effort and iteration, and, as Tokita explains, even some of the greatest struggles eventually resulted in a more polished product. "When we initially wrote up the script," he says by way of example, "there was a lot of long, extended dialogue. We had to cut it down to about one-fourth of its original size. It wasn't like trimming it down; we had to cut out big chunks of it. But it kind of made it more of a condensed, meaty version of the story." This editing exercise has led many to inaccurately assume that entire sections of story are just waiting to be re-inserted into the game, and some have urged Square Enix to add them into one of the remakes, but Tokita remains against the idea. "If we went back and implemented that, it would change the whole experience. It wouldn't be *Final Fantasy IV* any more."

And who would want *Final Fantasy IV* to be any different? For many, it was the first game in the series to really grab them and prove the worth of the Japanese RPG style, and it has therefore become one of the most revered SNES titles made. If you want further proof then look no further than the fact that this is by far the most remade and re-released *Final Fantasy* game of all time, having been ported to the PlayStation, WonderSwan Color and Virtual Console, and remade in many different forms for Game Boy Advance, Japanese mobile phones, PSP and DS… almost all of which were produced under the careful supervision of Tokita himself. It's clearly a game that remains close to the designer's heart even after years of working on other titles. "Of course, there were a lot of people involved in the project," he concedes, "but to bring the title together on my own, to finish it up was a big thing I'm proud of. I connected the maps, established the event scenes. When you put it in movie terms, it was kind of like being a cameraman and an editor at the same time. It helped me be really confident in myself."

Meteor Shower

GAME TESTING CAN be an arduous process on any game, but on *Final Fantasy IV* it even began to affect the team's ability to take care of personal hygiene, as Tokita recounts. "We were at the end of the testing period. I went home, I took a shower, and when I got back the screen was completely still, nothing was moving anymore – just some mysterious bug that had come up in development. We figured out what the issue was; it was something with the song data, where it was just continuously looping and nothing would come out. Something was wrong with the song files. After all the test players had gone home, we had to connect it to a bunch of different TVs and play each of the songs through to check that they were in line with the game. We had some limitations on whether we could take a shower during the testing process…"





Hiromichi Tanaka, lead designer of *FFIII* and later head of *FFXI* and *XIV*, was originally meant to design *FFIV* but left to join what would eventually become the *Secret Of Mana* project.



>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



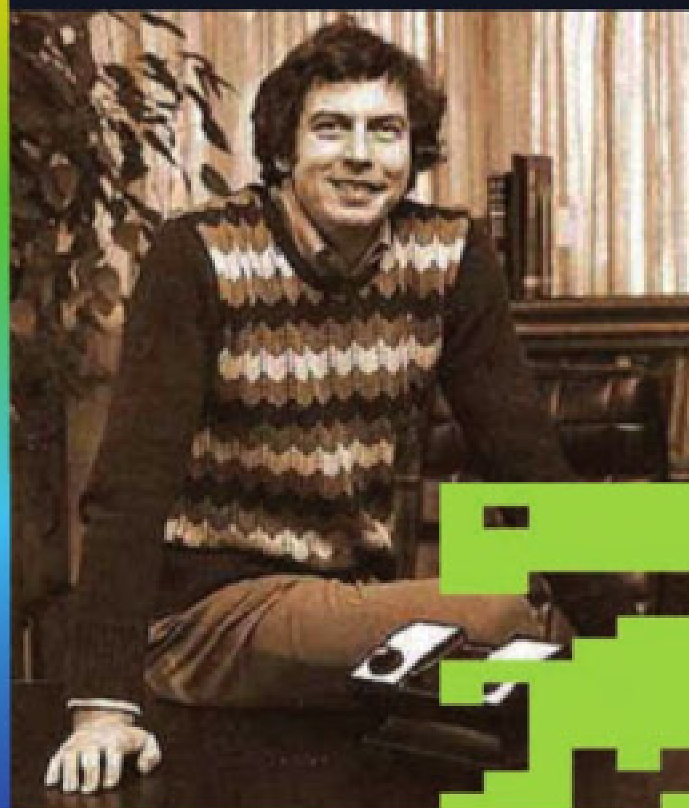
FFIV virtually restarted the series, refocusing the emphasis on linear story and distancing itself from the poular *Dragon Quest*.



FFV retained the linear narrative that would dominate the series for years, but increased gameplay complexity with its job system.











Designer of the Year Rob Fulop, center, shows off his award as Imagic president William F. X. Grubb and Billboard's Laura Foti look on. Fulop created the Imagic hit, "Demon Attack."

VCS VETERANS

Atari was the world's first videogame company to make it big, and the first to come crashing down to its knees. Howard Scott Warshaw speaks to the people who were there for both high and low, as they tell the unbelievable story in their own words

IMAGINE FOR A moment... you're having an amazing dream. You're getting a spectacular massage from a sexy companion in a luxurious hot tub, and everything feels so incredibly wonderful, and it's getting better, and it's getting better, and just as it's about to get unbelievably good... you wake up and realize there is a leak in the ceiling and you're soaking wet.

Hindsight is 20-20. A long time ago (in a Galaxian far far away) we launched a new medium at a time when the world was hyper-accelerating toward total media saturation. We not only created the new frontier but we did it 'on camera', 'in the news' and in front of a worldwide audience.

A revolution was happening all around us and we were too absorbed in the whole thing to actually see what was going on. And then it collapsed around us, leaving us knee-deep in ashes. Did we see it coming? Eventually we did, but usually, when we'd look up at the sky, we were so focused on the falling manna we wouldn't notice the rain was washing out our parade.

I put out a call to my compatriots of yore and asked them to share two moments from our collective past; the moment they first realised that games were going to be huge, and the moment they first realised things were going down in flames. I heard from people who planned it, people who manned it and people who caught the tail and simply hung on. Together they represent all phases of 'the first console lifecycle'.

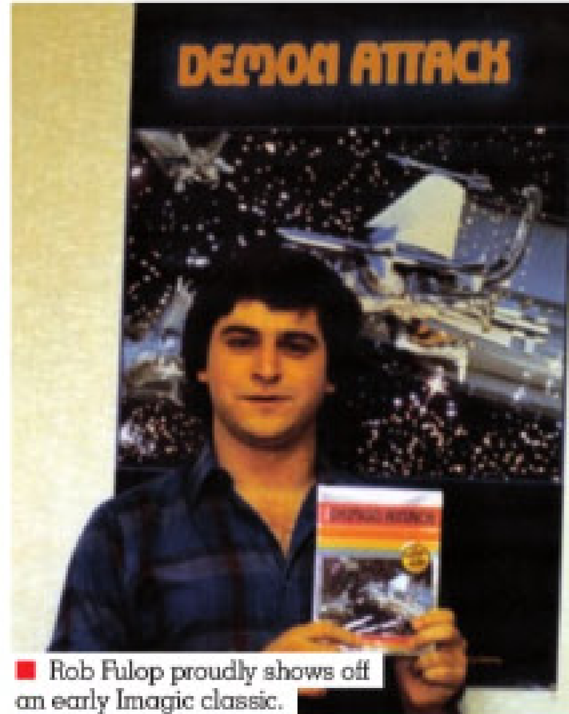
We all saw it from different angles because we were very different people coming from very different places. And that diversity of perspective and orientation yielded two marvelous outcomes. The first was an exciting new medium, which launched an incredibly dynamic industry. The second is this very article.

Where do we start? How about with the men who started Atari, Nolan Bushnell and Al Alcorn? Bushnell was the first to see it coming by a long shot. "It may sound silly, but I knew that it was going to be huge when I first played *Spacewar!* in 1966, in the University Computer Lab. I knew that the technology would fit in the Amusement Park where I was working summers. What I didn't know was that I was going to be a part of it. It became clear at the September 1974 AMOA show [Amusement and Music Operators Association, the original E3]... other companies were content to copy us and were not developing technical relevance. I knew then that Atari could become dominant." Clearly, Nolan knew it would be big, he just didn't know how big. If he had, he wouldn't have accepted $28 million in 1976 when the company would be worth a billion a few years later.

Al Alcorn also saw it in '74, but in a different venue: "The first time I realised that video games were going to be big was when we were on a cruise boat on Hakone Lake in Japan in '74, taking a day off from business meetings. And there was a ball and paddle arcade videogame on the boat. CONTINUED >.

TOP OF THE TOTEM POLE

AFTER ATARI, PEOPLE went in all directions, though most of those directions were game-related at first. By now people are all over the map; in and out of games, in and out of management and in and out of technology. Here are the managers, producers and executives. Nolan Bushnell, of course, went on to Chuck E. Cheese pizza and a series of entrepreneurial endeavors in interactive entertainment. Today he is CEO of uWink and, somewhat ironically, a member of the board on the current incarnation of Atari. Al Alcorn went on to Apple and then back to gaming, and is currently the CTO of Integrated Media Measurement, a handheld technology company. Paul Grace has been an executive at most of the major gaming companies at one point or another, and William Lord has made the leap from project manager to become a venture capitalist.



Rob Fulop proudly shows off an early Imagic classic.



It seemed very exotic and out of place to have a videogame there. I then began to realise that these things were going to have an impact on world culture."

Games popping up everywhere tipped off VCS programmer Steve Woita and producer Paul Grace. Woita says, "I saw the Atari Video System in every store's electronic section back in the mid to late Seventies. It was always great to go to Sears and see the latest 2600 game cartridge being displayed on a Sony TV where you could test drive." Grace actually felt surrounded. "I was pumping gas in my car, and at the next pump over two people were discussing turns in a maze... all I could think was, 'Everyone is playing games now!'"

JIM HUETHER KNEW it from the games we were making: "The first time I knew the videogame business was going to be big was in 1978, as I was finishing *Flag Capture* for the Atari 2600. I could see that the game, as well as others being developed – such as *Breakout* – were addictive and fun, and people would play and replay them for long periods of time. I knew then it was not going to be a fad."

Others recognized it from changes in the workplace itself. Marilyn Churchill (the first digital artist in game history) recalls, "I first realized that the game business was going to be huge when I suddenly noticed that there were lots of strange men in suits touring our halls. Being introduced to Steven Spielberg was another moment, as was being sent to New York to meet with The Muppets, and to L.A. to talk to the Disney folks."

For coin-op programmer Owen Rubin, it took a little longer, "For me, I guess it took a while to realise that games were going to be really big. I joined Atari so early in its life, and as my first gig right out of college, I had no idea what 'big' really meant, because I watched it continue to grow and grow over time in smaller steps. But when a large company like Warner Communications started walking through the facility on a regular basis, and we all had to put on dog-and-pony shows to look good so they would buy us, I knew we were becoming big. Being invited to speak on 'Newton's Apple' and other news shows was a major clue for me as well."

I WAS SEEING PAC-MAN CRAP EVERYWHERE; TV, PRINT, EVEN A SONG AND VIDEO

To animator Alan Murphy, the signs were unmistakable, "It was pretty clear that games would be big when, halfway through the *Pac-Man* project, some guy in a wearable Pac-Man outfit showed up at the office for some event; a really screwy-looking outfit with the guy's head in Pac-Man's mouth, like a dot. It wasn't long after that that I was seeing *Pac-Man* crap everywhere; TV, print, even a song and video. I still have that ridiculous video. Maybe it was because I was working at Atari on the game, but it seemed to me to be everywhere I looked. Then the suits and the money arrived..."

The media seemed to be the key for programmers like Rob Fulop (VCS) and Ed Rotberg (coin-op). Rob remembers, "When I saw my first *Demon Attack* commercial on TV. Then I knew it was big." Rotberg's recollections cover other media outlets: "I guess I first really realised that the games business was going to be big when a number of us got interviewed for the Smithsonian Magazine and Atari would not allow the author to use our real names. It was also around this time that one of my games was used in a movie – I can still recall watching Jill Clayburgh rolling around one of my trackballs – er... rolling around a trackball on the game."

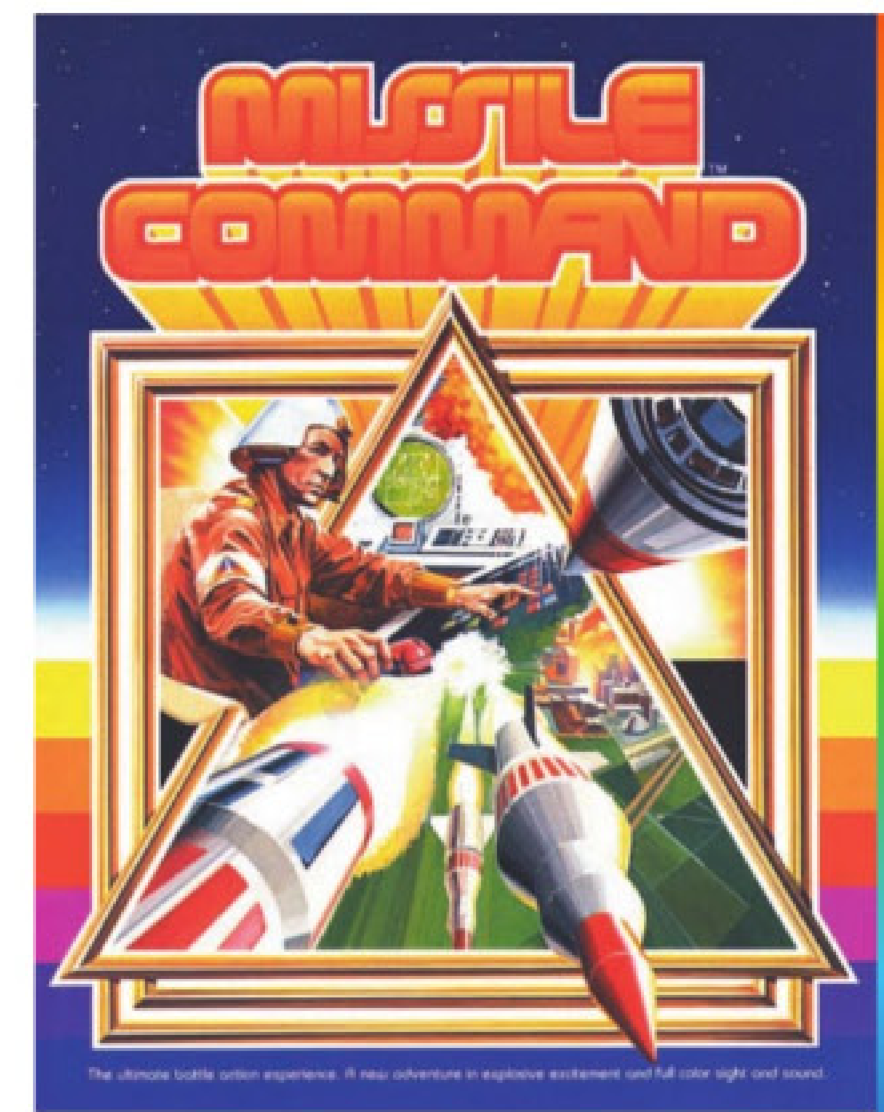
For some, it was more personal. They knew their love of games was shared by others. Product manager William Lord swears, "It was *Pac-Man* that dragged me across that invisible line with little resistance, with its perky little platform game mystique. I remember taking prolonged lunch breaks from work to see what new level I could get to. I'll never forget my job interview with Ray Kassar, sitting there, star-struck, rubbing the tip of my right thumb against the hard callous that had built up inside the knuckle on my middle finger, pretzels on my mind..."

Coin-op programmer Franz Lanzinger tossed in his two cents-worth (or two tokens?). "I was a huge fan of arcade games, playing everything that showed up at the arcades. It was a dream for me to get to work at Atari coin-op, and it's amazing that they hired me even though I had no experience making games. It made an impression when I started at Atari (in early 1982) and found out that they had 5000 employees, and that there were 30 new hires that week."

VCS programmer Matt Hubbard never had a doubt: "I was a fanboy. I played videogames at the bowling alley when I was in high school. When I got to Atari, I already knew videogames in general were here to stay."

For programmers Bob Smith and Rob Zdybel (both VCS), it was about astronomical numbers. As Smith says, "I hired on at Atari thinking it was going to be the next big thing, but that decision was based more on my obsession. When I was first hired at Atari, every week during my first few months [my manager] would announce the sales numbers for Rick Mauer's *Space Invaders*. No one could believe it. When the number topped one million, I suspected this was going to be big business." And Zdybel adds, "The first I knew that things were big was when Rick Maurer told me that his *Space Invaders* had already sold millions of copies. I had never really thought in terms of numbers of units sold until that day. I was just making games for the fun of it. I knew people were playing them... but millions?"

Whereas for game makers like Bob Polaro (VCS) and Keithen Hayenga (5200), other numbers were the major indicator. As Polaro puts it: "I knew it was big when we got our first royalty cheques." Hayenga also would have noticed this same clue, if he'd had one himself: "I was clueless. I came along after the Activision and Imagic exoduses; I suppose I should have had a hint when [my manager] was telling me about the Atari bonus plan, and I said that it was like icing on the cake. But he answered, 'Man, it's like cake on the cake!'"





For Tod Frye (VCS), the numerology spanned both worlds. "It is of interest to me to realise that I was not really paying attention to things with a concern for the overall industry context. I was pretty much heads-down playing *Missile Command*, *Defender* and *Robotron*, and trying to teach the 2600 to sing. That said, in retrospect, *Pac-Man* on the 2600 selling 3 million units in a week and the first bonus cheque for over $300K were certainly clues that the games industry could be huge."

THE RIDE UP the hill was a sweet one, to be sure. However, like high-diving, the climb is a series of steps but the fall is simply a moment. We all had our moments of fatalistic revelation; I guess comedy is enjoyable but tragedy is memorable. Case in point: when you are getting hit from the government on one side and the economy on the other. Sean Hennessy recalls, "Sadly, for me the realization came just after the 2600 *Dune* game design review. Two quarters of catastrophic losses, SEC sanctions against management, and a palpable change in attitude by corporate towards development foreshadowed the inevitable." The SEC is the Securities and Exchange Commission, the government arm responsible for slapping the financial wrists of people who trade stocks not wisely but too well.

Matt Hubbard, one of the wryer programmers adds, "I remember making a joke about Ray Kassar at the Vegas CES [Consumer Electronics Show – basically E3 before it was called E3], that he didn't know if he was going to the CES or the SEC after his very nicely timed stock dump."

Jim Huether took the global to the specific: "I first knew that things were going down in flames in 1982 after Jimmy Carter announced the country was going into a recession. Just after that, I found out that retailers were cancelling all refill orders. At first I was concerned that we wouldn't get our bonuses. Soon after, I started checking and discovered that many of the competitors were dumping their games at very low prices, and I realized it was going to be bad – but I did not realise just how bad it would be." This sparked Rob Fulop's recollection of an Imagic CONTINUED >

What's behind the coin slot?

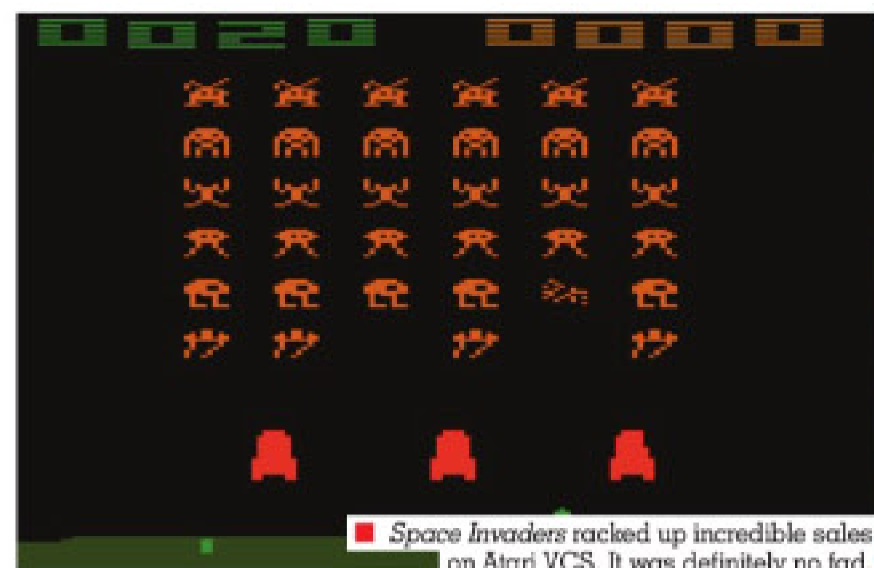
THE COIN-OP PEOPLE were a different breed from the home system programmers, although they were every bit as personable, that's for sure. For one thing, every one of them went on to become an executive at an interactive technology company. Franz Lanzinger, the guy who couldn't believe Atari hired him, is now President of his own company, Actual Entertainment. Ed Rotberg, an industry journeyman, is currently Director at Mine Shaft Entertainment. And Owen Rubin is now CTO at Edison Labs, a new technologies developer. Owen went the furthest out of games (and still staying in technology), actually working for a utility company at one point.

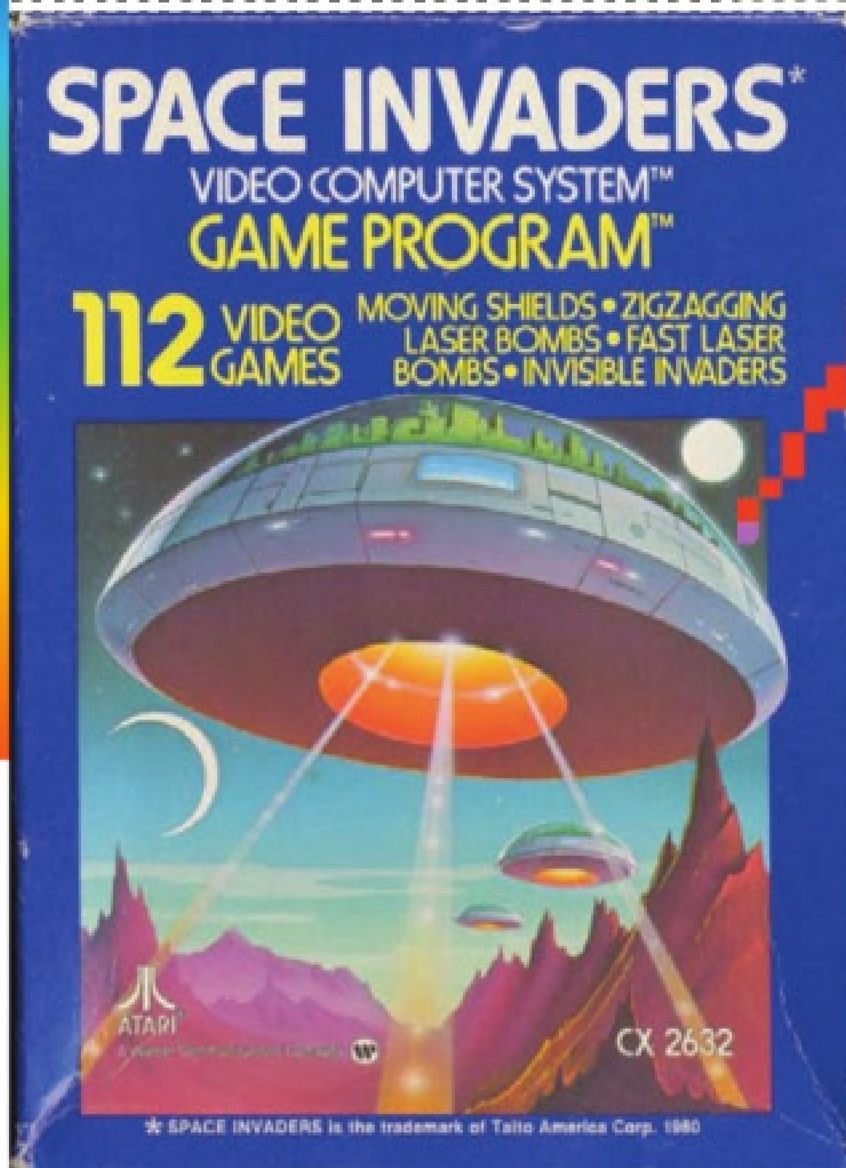


Ed Rotberg



Franz Lanzinger


Space Invaders racked up incredible sales on Atari VCS. It was definitely no fad.



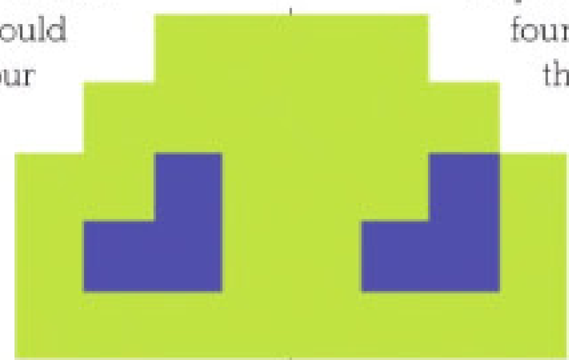
hospitality party during CES: "At the party a writer named Michael Schrage came up to Bill Fox [Imagic's CEO] and gave him the CandyMan's business card saying 'you need to call this guy.' The CandyMan was a 'dead inventory' liquidator, and he'd never been busier."

Some people got it from the way the industry was changing around them, like Steve Woita, "I knew it was in trouble when Atari was purchased by people [the Tramiels] who no longer wanted to build videogames, and just wanted to do an operating system for the Atari ST." Paul Grace notes, "When people became attracted to EA because they could make great money, and not because they could make great games, I knew it was the beginning of the end – or, more properly, the end of the beginning."

IT BECAME APPARENT THAT NO NEW ATARI PRODUCTS WERE EVER GOING TO BE RELEASED

OTHERS SAW IT more in terms of how their particular world changed. Marilyn Churchill says, "I fully realized Atari was in decline when our Aptos satellite group was recalled. I knew then the thrill was gone." It's a sentiment echoed by Aptos co-worker Alan Murphy. "The beginning of the end came for us when the valley office decided to shut down Atari Research, and we all had to go back to commuting to the valley and put up with the suits again. Adios to unbridled creative pursuits."

Owen Rubin and Ed Rotberg focused more on how the environment made them change. As Owen puts it, "The first big fall, I guess that was a combination of two things. First, Warner splitting the company in two, and the Tramiel brothers buying the consumer/computer side of the business. I watched Jack [Tramiel] walk through the building with a large stack of money, pay people off and kick them out the door. Engineers on the consumer side were leaving the building like a sinking ship, and in a few quick days suddenly the building felt very empty. That was followed shortly by layoffs on the coin-op side, and I used that as a chance to jump from Atari to Bally, not realizing that the ship would continue to slowly sink for the next four years." Ed Rotberg saw the other side of it: "I was in management at that time, I was seeing all of the sales numbers start to plummet and I guess it really hit me when I had to do my first layoffs. It was not fun."



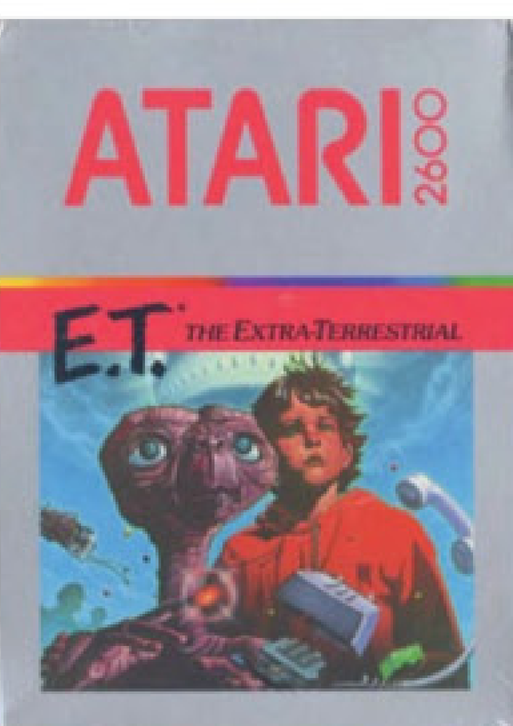
Then there were some who never saw it as ending, like Franz Lanzinger. "It's easy to forget that many people thought of videogames as a fad back then. Surely they would go the way of the pet rock? In 1984, I even wrote an essay about it entitled 'Videogames are not a fad.' I never believed that things were going down in flames for the whole industry, but rather that we were having a temporary setback, even though Atari did crash and burn." And there were also people like Keithen Hayenga who never saw anything at all: "I just sat back in the lab, trying to make games that I wanted to play myself. So the end caught me completely by surprise."

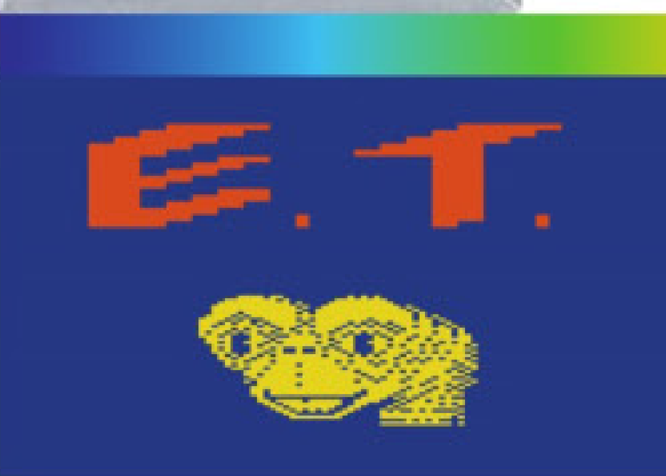
Bob Polaro saw the end coming "when we heard about the carts getting buried." William Lord clarifies: "The end became pretty obvious, whether it was the 14 million *E.T.* 2600 VCS cartridges in concrete in Alamogordo, New Mexico, or the glut of *Combats*, *Hangmans*, *Pele Soccers*, et cetera, that we choked on when we agreed to offer credits for all returned unsold games."

For Bob Smith, it was somewhat more personal when his IPO dream was sabotaged. IPO stands for Initial Public Offering, but for people who get involved with start-up companies, IPO stands for 'Incredible Pay-Off'. That's the day when a big chunk of founder's stock gets converted to cash and the founders actually get rich. Bob Smith was just such a founder waiting for IPO day with Imagic: "It didn't hit home until Imagic's public offering failed. It became obvious that Atari didn't know how to run the business, and everyone was going down with them. Since they had a grudge against Imagic (half the founders jumped ship from Atari), they announced poor earnings early to short circuit our offering." Both Smith and Rob Fulop were literally 24 hours away from attaining the Silicon Valley dream of cashing out, and Atari leaked very bad numbers about six weeks early just to ruin it for them. Talk about a bad day.

The artists, and those who jumped ship...

THE FIRST TWO artists in the history of videogames were my co-workers back in the day. Marilyn Churchill was the original on; today she is honoring her true artistic nature as the owner of Mystic Heroine Adventures, producing a children's fantasy book series. Alan Murphy has remained true to his original digital [farm] roots as a Senior 3D Artist at Zynga. Three of the respondents were people who left Atari to go to direct competitors at the time. The Imagic boys, Rob Fulop (now Director of Design at Perchance) and Bob Smith (an independent game-maker) are still working in the game industry. Matt Hubbard, who went to Activision, now teaches Mathematics at a California University.





E.T is often credited with toppling the US games industry, but corporate greed was more at fault.

AND THEN THERE'S the incomparable Tod Frye, with a perspective all his own: "As far as the decline and fall of the Atari Empire, I was not really paying attention as I was so busy with a combination of transferring *Pac-Man* bucks to Pablo Escobar and squeezing more and more out of the VCS. In retrospect, the fact that we did *not* expand, the move to Milpitas and transfer of bosses from coin-op – with the weird division of VCS game-makers all over the building – that was all just an ongoing decay from the peak. Specifically, when I finished 2600 *Xevious* (which I consider an accomplishment as a coding feat but a pretty useless actual game), I was told that marketing was going to playtest both 2600 *Stargate* (also a technical feat, also a pretty useless product) and *Xevious*, and choose one to go forward with based on the results – a real contraction from just a year before, when *any* completed ROM would be marketed. The 2600 was running out of steam, and the gameplay innovation that could have kept it going was not happening at Atari."

Rob Zdybel shares similar sentiments (and an ominous note for one of today's burgeoning beasts): "I knew things had completely gone to hell when they told us to pack our bags and move to [a new building] and report to surviving executives from the coin-op division. I'll name no names, but they were major bastards who actually threw a pretty good party when they wanted to. Lo, how the mighty had fallen, especially since we were all well aware that coin-op sales were in the toilet. Or maybe it was the Christmas party they held for us at the Lion's club with a no-host bar, food in aluminum troughs and County Sheriffs for security, while the execs partied at the Sheraton in San Francisco. That was an early indicator. Are you listening, Google employees?"

And we end where we started, with Atari's founders, who were not only the first to see it coming but also led the way in seeing the fall, each spotting the early symptoms of Atari's fatal disease. Al Alcorn observes how fear can overtake impetus when trying to innovate: "I realized that Atari was going down in flames in '81, when Ray Kassar refused to release the *Cosmos* holographic game to production. It became apparent that no new products were ever going to be released by Atari. I took an enforced retirement for a couple of years, but I knew for sure it was braindead. The fear of failure was more powerful than the hope for success."

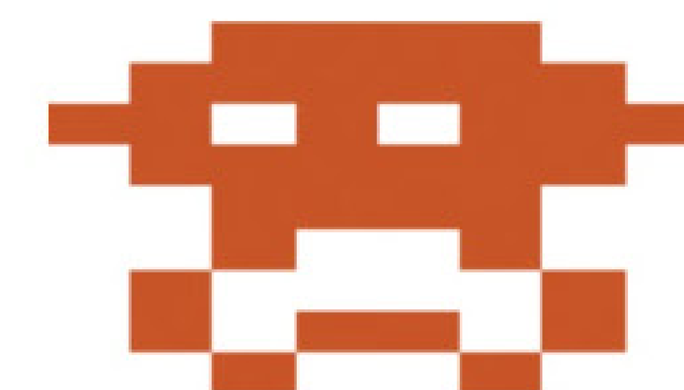

NOLAN BUSHNELL
Atari Founder

Finally, Bushnell notes how failing to plan isn't the only way to plan for failure, recalling "the second planning session after the Warner purchase, when several very bad strategic decisions were made. I knew that while there was much milking of the current product line the age of Atari innovation was over." And there it was: the beginning of the end.

That was the Atari phenomenon and the larval stage of the videogame industry. Despite its trials and mishaps, it was among the richest experiences in our lives. We were there at the beginning, creating and defining a new medium. There were remarkable ups and downs, but my big takeaway is realizing how lucky I was to be in the middle of the maelstrom with some of the most interesting, talented and enjoyable people I have ever known. Atari left me with a joy that still glows after 30 years, and I know it will last the rest of my life. Of course, the other thing I see in looking back is the incredible lessons I learned at Atari, which come with the inherent lifelong challenge of not repeating them. So perhaps I should rephrase the opening of this feature. Maybe the expression 'Hindsight is 20-20' is just another way of saying 'Watch your butt!'

A FEW STATS ON THE OUTCOMES

THERE WERE NINETEEN respondents to my initial query, so when I include myself it's an even twenty. Out of those people, 35 per cent are currently out of games entirely, in such diverse fields as teaching, book publishing, security software, psychotherapy, finance and database consulting. However, if you go back just a couple of years, only 20 per cent were actually out. Of the non-executives back then (18 people), only five have become executives since – which says that most of these people preferred to stay down on the org chart producing entertainment rather than climb the org chart to manage it. But the most compelling stat is the percentage of people who joined at least two more gaming companies after Atari: 100 per cent.




Franz Lanzinger enjoying a game of his very own *Crystal Castles* back in the day. We wonder if he just plays it on Game Room nowadays.

THE LAST OF THE HOLDOUTS

WE FIND AN interesting trend among the programmers who remained at Atari until the company (and the industry) we knew and loved was no more. Every one of them is either still making games directly or is out of games completely. Bob Polaro, Rob Zdybel and Steve Woita are still actually writing code directly on gaming or interactive entertainment projects, and Tod Frye has found a way to keep writing code for years, making contributions to gaming technology without being a part of any specific project team. Sean Hennessy, Keithen Hayenga and Jim Huether are all still doing hands-on software development, but entirely outside the world of entertainment (interactive or otherwise). And me? I'm now a professional psychotherapist, which is a whole other kind of interactive entertainment.


Tod Frye. Still in games.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



PANZER DRAGOON SAGA

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

DETAILS

FORMAT: Saturn
YEAR: 1998
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Team Andromeda
EXPECT TO PAY: £80-£100



EXHIBIT A: The original packaging consists of two plastic cases parcelled together in one big cardboard box. Finding the whole lot together is pretty tricky.



EXHIBIT B: *Panzer Dragoon Saga* came on a whopping four CD-ROMs. Make sure they're all included in the lot you go for.



EXHIBIT C: If you just want to sample *PDS* then you may like to track down issue 31 of *Sega Saturn Magazine*. It came with the first disc mounted to the cover and is slightly easier to find.

Why It's Rare

ALTHOUGH DEVELOPMENT of *Panzer Dragoon Saga* began at the same time as its predecessor, *Panzer Dragoon Zwei*, the production suffered numerous delays due to the ambition of the project, and even as a result of some deaths within the studio. And by the time the game was released in the summer of 1998, Sega Saturn's commercial viability had diminished so much that it hardly seemed worth bringing out any more games. Only a handful of Saturn titles were released that year in the West and *Panzer Dragoon Saga* was among the last, receiving a limited production run of just 6,000 copies in the United States and a few thousand more in Europe.

After being hyped up to unprecedented levels by Sega magazines of the time, *Panzer Dragoon Saga* was snapped up within the first few weeks of its release by a small but loyal user base of Saturn owners, and was rarely seen again in videogame stores. This quickly led to inflated but justified prices among collectors. Finding the full four-disc release is now quite difficult – not to mention expensive – though the first disc alone is relatively easy to find since it was actually given away free with the May issue of the UK's *Sega Saturn Magazine*.



FACT! The Japanese version of the game, named *Azel: Panzer Dragoon RPG*, is actually very common. Too bad about the language barrier.

Worth Playing?

OF ALL THE games featured in Collector's Corner to date, *Panzer Dragoon Saga* is by far the best. Made at the peak of Sega's experimental risk-taking era, it epitomises the period with a game that made little financial sense but was a brilliantly unique creation through and through.

The blend of RPG and on-rails shooter didn't seem like an obvious mix at the time but turned out to be a wonderfully playable experience that used the best of both genres and none of the bad. The art style and presentation, meanwhile, though influenced by countless fantasy films and novels, was more than the sum of its parts and helped create a game world that compelled the player to see everything it had to offer, playing through all four epic discs of content without ever growing bored. When critics call *Panzer Dragoon Saga* a masterpiece, they're not exaggerating for a moment, which only makes the game's scarcity all the more tragic. Worse still, Sega has recently revealed that the source code was lost years ago, making a modern port extremely unlikely. If you want to play it then the expensive Saturn route is the only one to take, but we can assure you it's worth every penny.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Damon Locke**
Occupation: **Project Manager**

Why collect Saturn games and what drew you to Panzer Dragoon Saga in particular?
I started collecting Saturn games because at the time Sega made the best arcade games and Saturn had promised arcade-perfect conversions (which didn't quite turn out to be true), and as a massive fan of *Virtua Fighter* and *Daytona*, I was a day-one buyer of the console. I'd bought the previous *Panzer Dragoon* titles but was surprised to hear that the third game in the series would be an RPG. At the time, I was not sure about it as I'd never really played RPGs before.

Tell us how you found the game.
I never had to hunt around for this one as I have for some of my other games. I bought it sealed on the day of release from a local Electronics Boutique for the RRP. I've personally never seen another on a shop shelf since that day and I doubt I ever will.

What condition was it in, and how much did you pay?
I bought it brand new on its day of release. I think I paid £35 and very nearly didn't buy it because *House Of The Dead* was released that day and I had wanted that more. I am glad I did now though. I take very good care of my software but over time have given this title just a little bit more care and attention due to its rarity.

Do you play PDS, and if so, what do you think of it?
I admit I've only played through and completed this game once, but I recognise it as a masterpiece – there are very few games that totally immerse you in the world created within it (only *Shenmue* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* spring to mind). It took me a long time to complete perhaps due to my previous inexperience with RPGs, but it was a fantastic introduction to the genre and I really must revisit it someday.

Finally, would you ever consider selling Panzer Dragoon Saga, or is it yours for life?
Regardless of the price this can sometimes go for, I would never ever sell it. From its sophisticated graphic style, its ambient soundtrack, and unusual story, right down to the artwork on the back of the two cases that house the four CDs, everything about it oozes class.

Reverse Engineers

RARE AND NINTENDO ENJOYED ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS IN GAMING HISTORY, YET VERY LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT HOW THE RELATIONSHIP BEGAN. games™ DISCOVERS HOW THE STAMPER BROTHERS UNLOCKED THE DOOR TO THE JAPANESE GAMING GIANT, AND TALKS TO THE MAN WHO PROVIDED THE KEY

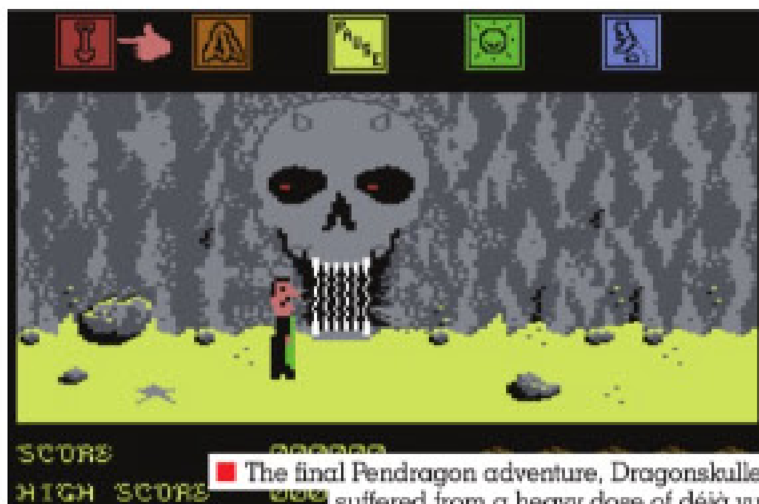


EVERYONE KNOWS that Rare rose from the ashes of Ultimate Play The Game. In late 1985, Ultimate founders Chris and Tim Stamper sold the company name and its gaming catalogue to US Gold. The reason for the sale was simple: producing games for Ultimate's core platform – the Sinclair Spectrum – was no longer making enough money to fund expansion. The brothers had pretty much pushed the Spectrum to its limits with groundbreaking games like *Underwurlde* and *Knightlore*, and the titles they released for other 8-bit computers failed to emulate the sales success of the Speccy originals. So they sold Ultimate and formed Rare to develop games for the Nintendo Famicom/NES, a platform with global reach and amazing potential. Rare went on to release dozens of games for the Nintendo console and the two firms forged a close alliance that flourished during the 1990s. But you knew that already. What you probably don't know are the lengths Rare took to court Nintendo and consummate that relationship.

Nintendo was famously fussy when it came to selecting third-party developers CONTINUED >.



Dave's first published game was the Scramble clone Warlok, released for the Atari 400/800 by Calisto in 1984.



The final Pendragon adventure, Dragonskulle, suffered from a heavy dose of déjà vu.





"THE BRIEF WAS TO 'PROVE' YOU WERE ABLE TO DEVELOP FOR THE SYSTEM"

…and the UK counted for nothing over in Japan. As an induction process, Nintendo required potential developers to produce an example of a working game for the NES without any assistance or technical documentation. Rare accepted the challenge, but the problem was that Chris Stamper was a talented Z80 programmer and the NES was powered by the 6502 processor. Luckily, they had a 6502 developer in their midst.

Dave Thomas honed his programming skills on a succession of 6502-powered computers. He learnt to code on an Acorn Atom, then upgraded to an Atari 400 and used it to write his first published game (the space shooter *Warlok*). It was then a quick jump to the Commodore 64, where he teamed up with his brother Bob to create an arcade adventure set in a creepy castle (Dave did the coding, while Bob drew the graphics). The game was called *Staff Of Karnath* and the pair aimed high by offering the finished game to the Stampers before contacting any other publisher. To their immense surprise, Tim Stamper rolled up at their door in his Porsche 911 Turbo and offered them a four-game deal on the spot.

Staff Of Karnath was released in December 1984 to immediate acclaim. *Personal Computer Games* magazine awarded it 9/10 and it sold more than 40,000 copies. The game's star, Sir Arthur Pendragon, went on to appear in a further three C64 adventures – *Entombed*, *Blackwyche* and *Dragonskulle*. Each successive game sold fewer and fewer, resulting in dwindling royalty payments for the Thomas brothers, so it was a relief when the Stampers invited them to join Rare. "When we finished the Arthur Pendragon titles we were asked if we wanted to look into developing for the Nintendo Entertainment System," Dave tells us. "The NES was yet another 6502-based system and so seemed ideal to move onto, with the promise of a substantial income from any titles we produced for it. The brief from Nintendo in Japan was to effectively 'prove' you were able to develop for the system by showing you had the technical and programming expertise and produce a game demo."

RARE HAD TO reverse-engineer the NES to have any hope of understanding how Nintendo's box of tricks worked. "Chris Stamper supplied a PC and he was able to put together a device which enabled code to be downloaded via the parallel interface onto a cartridge inserted into the console," reveals Dave. "This gave us the ability to poke around the various memory locations and try to find how the graphics and sounds were activated. It was literally a case of sending values to the ROM addresses one by one until something happened."

After spending a few weeks poking the hardware addresses to discover what they did, Dave had sussed out enough of the NES's inner workings to begin to develop a working game example. "I started to put together a demo with Bob. We decided that something simple would be appropriate and so developed a game called *Space Hunter* which was a vertical-scrolling shoot-'em-up utilising the console's sprite and smooth-scrolling background capabilities along with various sound effects and some music. Once we were happy with the game it was sent to Japan for evaluation by Nintendo." A few weeks passed and good news arrived from Nintendo HQ. "They decided that we'd proved ourselves capable of developing for the console and ironically then sent us all the technical manuals for it! Henceforth started Rare's long association with Nintendo."

THAT'S RIGHT, WITHOUT *Space Hunter* there would be no *Donkey Kong Country*, no *GoldenEye*, no *It's Mr Pants*. However, Rare's first ever NES game served only as a proof of concept and a foot in Nintendo's door. "Although *Space Hunter* was our own original product which was completed," says Dave. "Tim and Chris decided they didn't want to release it." Undeterred, Dave and Bob pressed on with the hope of creating a game that Rare could license to Nintendo – with the prospect of a healthy payday awaiting them when that happened. "Once we had received the technical manuals from Nintendo, we could start working on games for it in earnest. Bob and I created a number of game demos for the console over the following months, the only one of which I can recall was called *BC Games*. This was a kind of 'Stone Age Olympics' with echoes of *The Flintstones* and featured comical dinosaur racing and such like. I think in the end we spent 18 months working on the NES creating demos, none of which Tim or Chris were happy with and they never saw the light of day."

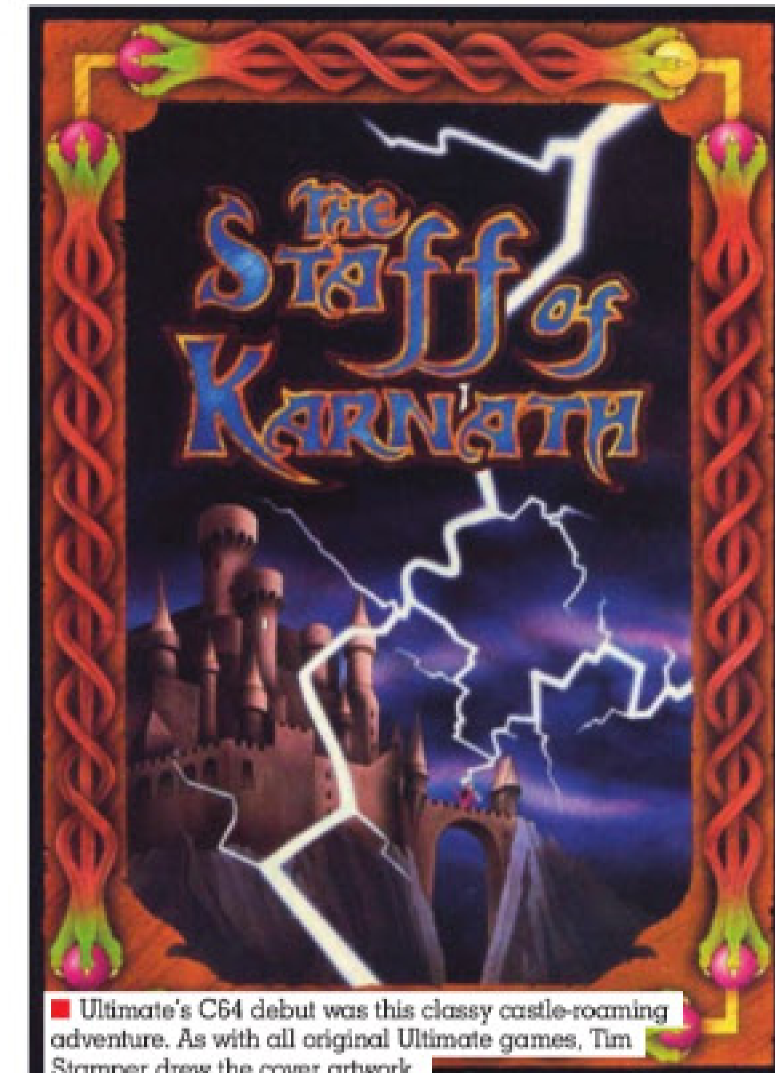
Did the Stampers have any particular issues with the games? Was it perhaps thought that they wouldn't work as Nintendo products? "I can't remember a great deal about specifics," answers Dave. "We just got the impression in the end that no matter what we produced they wouldn't have released it. My feeling was that they wanted total control over the products and didn't want an 'outside' team getting the first Rare product release. Whenever we got close to finishing a title they would suddenly say they were no longer interested in releasing it. After this happened with three or four games in a row, Bob and I were left completely skint. Unfortunately for us, during the whole time we'd spent working on the initial development for *Space Hunter* and the later games we weren't being paid a penny." Surely they received a down payment, a retainer, or at least some expenses? "No, we received absolutely nothing. Needless to say, we soon ran out of finances and had to pull out of our relationship with the Stampers. Looking back I think we were incredibly naive, but the hook was that, had a single one of the games we'd created for the NES actually been published, we'd have made hundreds of thousands of dollars from it so I think this kept us ploughing on for longer than we perhaps should have done. In the end we had no alternative but to pull out and go elsewhere for work."

Dave and Bob went cap in hand to Steve Wilcox of Elite Systems, who offered them the job of converting the *Buggy Boy* coin-op to the C64. They gladly accepted and Dave in particular was pleased to be working on the old beige bread bin once again. "The NES was a fair bit more difficult and restrictive to write for than the C64. We used to have to burn the games onto EPROM chips CONTINUED >.





The fantastic C64 version of *Buggy Boy* was the first of the Thomas brothers' three games for Elite Systems.



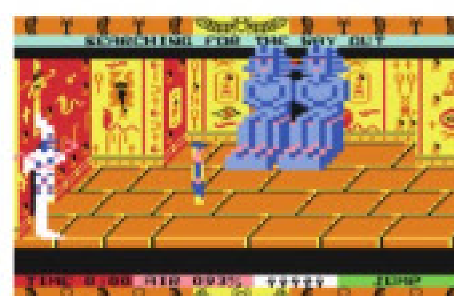
Ultimate's C64 debut was this classy castle-roaming adventure. As with all original Ultimate games, Tim Stamper drew the cover artwork.

Thomas Softography

The Thomas brothers may have failed in their aim to develop the first Rare game, but that's certainly no reflection on their talents. Here's the full list of games they worked on together, with the highlights being *Entombed* and *Buggy Boy* for the Commodore 64, and the PAL NES conversion of *Rainbow Islands* (which is superior to the alternative NTSC version).



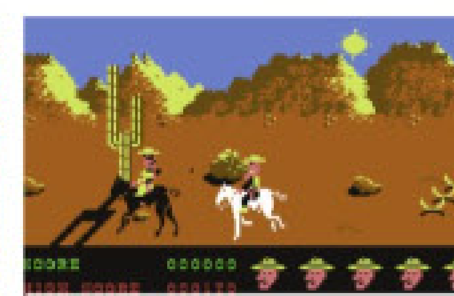
1984 **Staff Of Karnath** (Ultimate, C64)



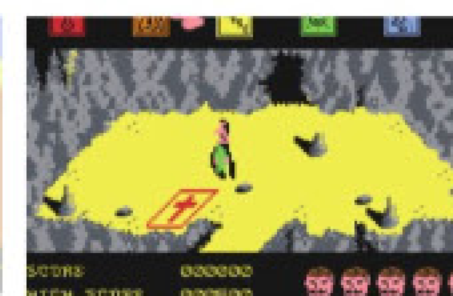
1985 **Entombed** (Ultimate, C64)



1985 **Blackwyche** (Ultimate, C64)



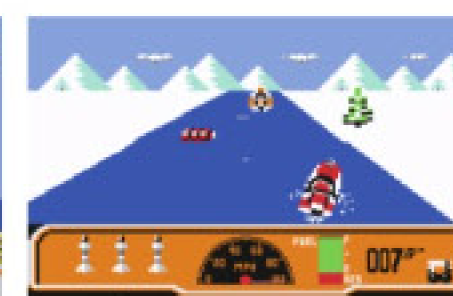
1985 **Outlaws** (Ultimate, C64)



1986 **Dragonskulle** (Ultimate, C64)



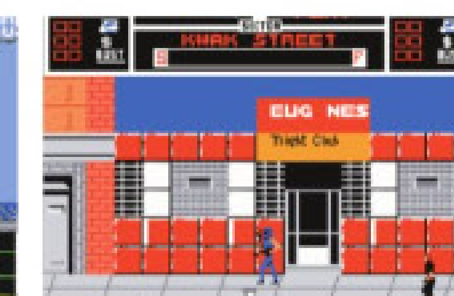
1987 **Buggy Boy** (Elite, C64)



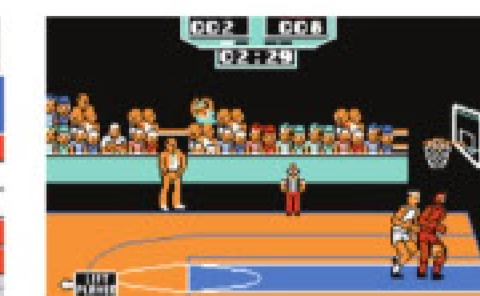
1988 **Live And Let Die** (Elite, C64)



1989 **First Strike** (Elite, C64)



1990 **NARC** (Rare/Acclaim, NES)



1990 **Arch Rivals** (Rare/Acclaim, NES)





■ Hmmm, those purple snow-peaked mountains look exactly like the ones in *Sabre Wulf*. Could Tim Stamper have drawn both? Almost certainly.

every time we wanted to test anything and the old chips then went into a UV eraser. The chips frequently failed, so it was a real hassle." Steve was initially reluctant to give them the gig, as he thought they may have lost touch with the C64's capabilities having spent a couple of years on the NES, so the brothers were determined to repay his faith. "We had the original arcade machine on loan and we videoed and played as much of it as we could to get the exact position of all the gates and flags. We really wanted to do a good job and spent absolutely ages mapping the game out so it was as authentic as possible given the limitations of the C64." Their commitment paid off and the game received excellent reviews from all quarters. It was easily the best home conversion of *Buggy Boy* on any machine, and some would argue that it was even more playable than Tatsumi's arcade original.


■ Our man in the middle, Dave Thomas. These days he works for Connect2Media, writing games for mobile devices.

The Stampers, meanwhile, pushed on with their NES plans and games started to arrive in the US towards the end of 1987. The downhill skiing game *Slalom* appeared first and this was followed by action platformer *Wizards & Warriors*.

In December '87 Tim Stamper revealed that they'd completed work on six games and a further eight were in development. Any lingering doubts that the Stampers should have stuck with Ultimate and the Speccy were immediately dispelled by the release of *R.C. Pro-Am* in spring 1988. This classic isometric racer was a huge hit, clocking up worldwide sales of 2.3 million. Rare had truly arrived on the NES, and between 1987 and 1991 they released more than 40 titles for the console, including a mix of original games, arcade conversions and film/TV licences.

■■■ LOOKING BACK, DAVE is hardly surprised that Rare and Nintendo worked so well together as the signs were there from the start. "The relationship seemed to be very good from what I gathered. I recall the Stampers visiting Japan on occasion and Nintendo always seemed impressed by the work that was shown to them."

We wondered if he felt any bitterness toward the Stampers, particularly as Dave and Bob's *Space Hunter* game was instrumental in opening the door to Nintendo and yet they never managed to benefit from the situation. "Clearly the Stampers have profited greatly from the relationship with Nintendo. However, they were supremely talented and I'm sure would have achieved this with or without our initial help. Bob and I took a huge financial risk in working on the initial Nintendo development and so did they. The fact was that they had much greater resources than ourselves and were able to stay the course. I do think, though, that it's a shame they weren't prepared to acknowledge the contribution we had made or even give us a simple thanks at the time."

Insert Credit

■ It's maddeningly difficult trying to work out who did what (or not) in early Ultimate/Rare games, simply because they never carried credits. Dave has revealed that it was strictly part of the deal that the Arthur Pendragon games did not include their names (although the brothers cheekily sneaked their initials onto the final screen of their last Ultimate game, *Dragonskulle*). The biggest mystery surrounds the authorship of the last few Ultimate titles released in 1986/7. The Stampers were presumably busy with Rare at this point, and their last Spectrum game was *Gunfright*. **games™** can reveal that current Rare studio director Mark Betteridge wrote *Bubbler* for the Spectrum, and it's almost certain he was responsible for *Cyberun* and *Martianoids* too. Mark was also behind a number of the NES games, including classics like *Cobra Triangle*, *Battletoads* and *Snake, Rattle 'n' Roll*. Of course, we know that the Pickford brothers' Zippo Games outfit developed a number of titles for Rare, including *Ironsword: Wizards & Warriors II* and *Solar Jetman*, but the details behind many of the in-house titles remain shrouded in mystery. We guess there's always fun in trying to find out…


CONGRATULATIONS
YOU HAVE COMPLETED

D R A G O N S K U L L E

THIS CONCLUDES THE PENDRAGON
ADVENTURE SERIES

WE HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED
PLAYING THEM

D.T. AND R.E.T. 1985

■ If you managed to complete *Dragonskulle* you'd see the 'woz ere' initials left by Dave and Bob Thomas.

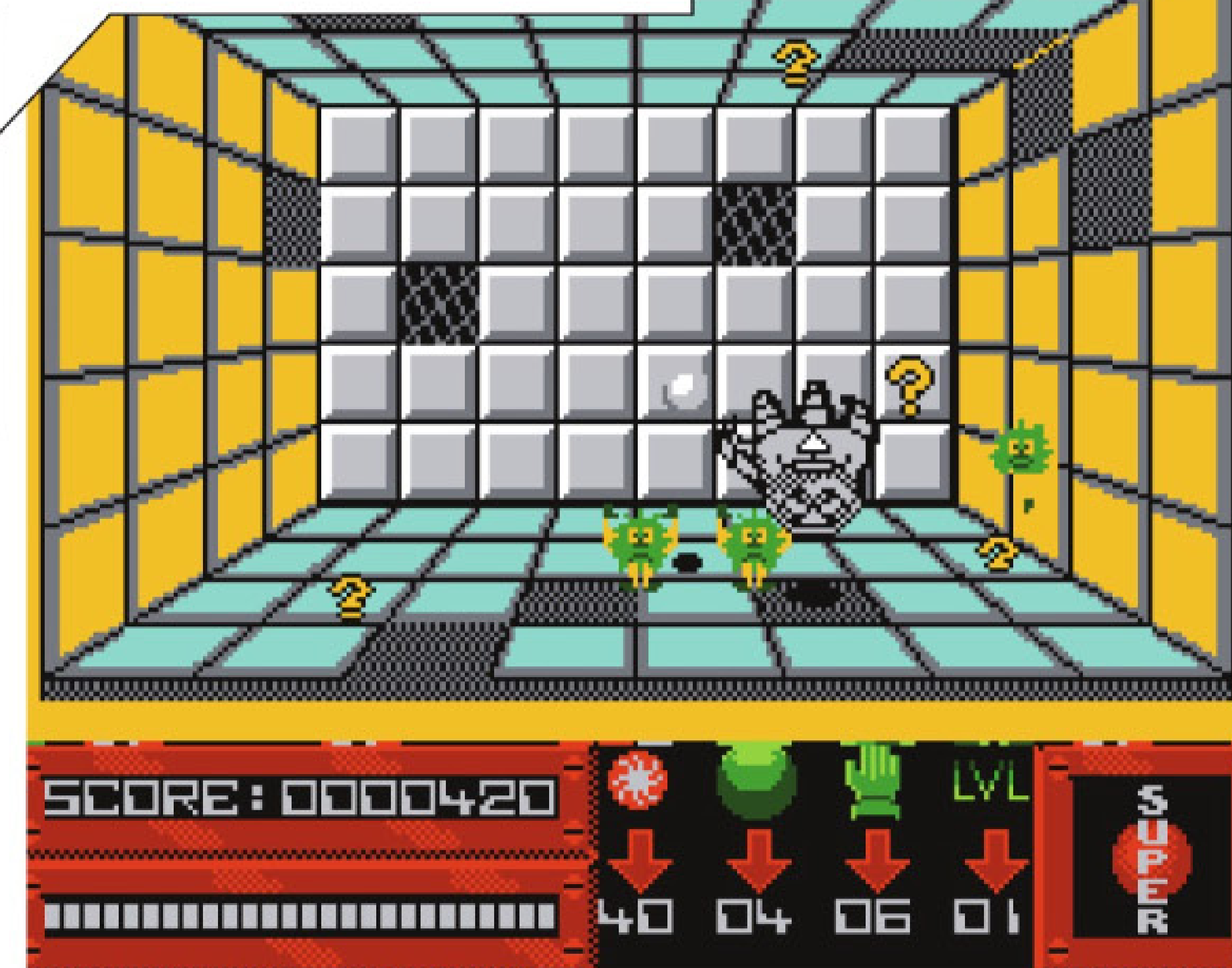
■■■ THEIR EFFORTS WERE not entirely in vain however. Around three years after parting company with the Stampers, Rare asked Dave and Bob to create NES versions of two coin-ops – the hyper-violent shooter *NARC* and the arcade basketball game *Arch Rivals*. In accepting, they were able to proudly state on their CVs that they'd developed games for both Ultimate and Rare, two of the UK's most revered software houses.



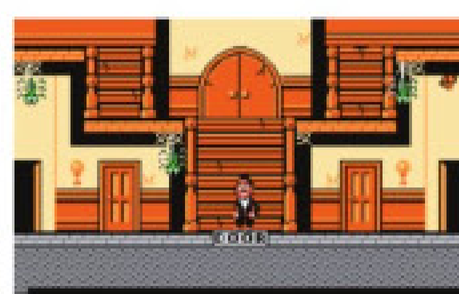
"I suppose in the end it was a bitter-sweet time for us," reflects Dave. "We had a lot of fun doing the Pendragon adventures and found the Stampers to be great to work for during this time. We visited them and their parents many times at Ashby and later at their farmhouse near Twycross. I think we were pretty much in awe of them and couldn't quite believe we were working with them. We had a huge amount of respect for them and they were always very generous and warm people. This changed, though, when we moved onto the NES and we became increasingly frustrated. Who knows what we might have achieved had we been able to stick with it and produce that initial NES game. At the time, though, I remember thinking that this just wasn't going to happen, and although we did eventually produce a couple of games for them, our relationship was never quite the same."

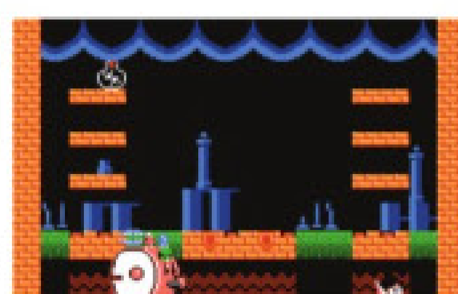
■ Current Rare studio director Mark Betteridge was the man behind several NES titles, including *Battletoads*.

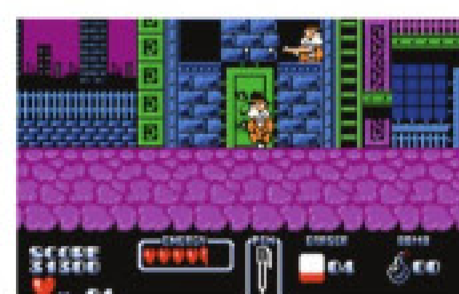
"NINTENDO ALWAYS SEEMED IMPRESSED BY THE WORK THAT WAS SHOWN TO THEM"




1991
Rainbow Islands
(Ocean, NES)

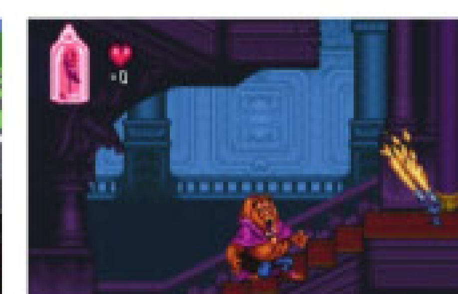

1991
The Addams Family
(Ocean, NES)


1992
Parasol Stars
(Ocean, NES)


1992
Cool World
(Ocean, NES)


1992
Ferrari Grand Prix Challenge
(Acclaim, NES)

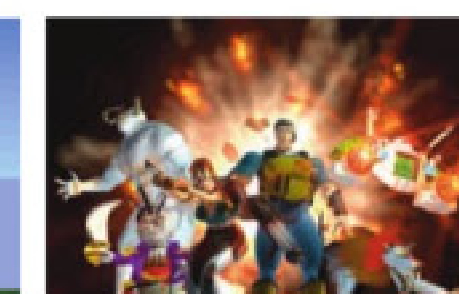

1993
Nigel Mansell's World Championship
(GameTek, NES)


1993
Beauty And The Beast
(Hudson Soft, SNES)



1994
Full Throttle Racing
(GameTek, SNES)


1995
Kawasaki Superbike Challenge
(Time Warner, SNES)

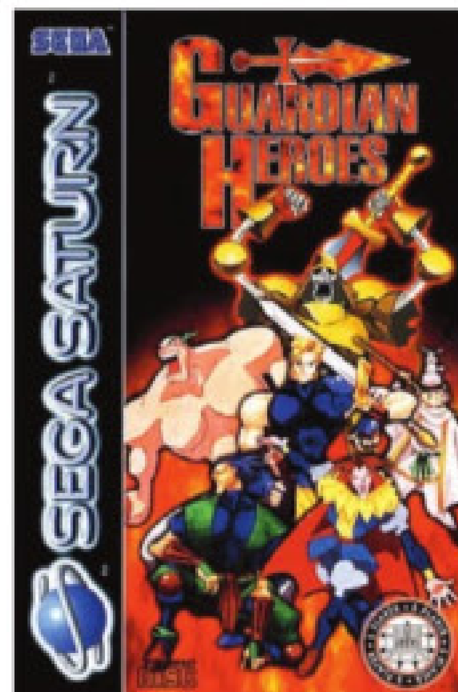

1997
Guts 'N' Garters In DNA Danger
(Ocean, PC)



BEHIND THE SCENES

GUARDIAN HEROES

Easy to overlook at the time, thanks to its home on the Saturn, Guardian Heroes is now getting a second chance to prove its greatness on Xbox Live Arcade. We speak to Treasure to find out how this overlooked masterpiece came to be



Released: 1996
Format: Saturn
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Treasure

KEY STAFF:
Tetsuhiko Kikuchi Executive Producer
Masaki Ukyo Executive Director
Masato Maegawa Management

IT WAS 1996. In the UK, Britpop had recently sparked into existence, co-existing with the emergent mainstream dance music and club culture. East 17's 'Stay Another Day' had just topped the Christmas charts (to be replaced by the criminally bad 'Cotton Eye Joe' early in the new year). Action bluster was all the rage at the box-office, with the likes of *Waterworld*, *Braveheart*, *GoldenEye* and the slightly more sophisticated *Seven* topping recent film charts.

In Japan, recent movie releases included *Ghost In The Shell*, *Hana Yori Dango*, and *Shall We Dance?*, and even *Godzilla* was still going strong, with its 22nd instalment (*Godzilla Vs. Destoroyah*) topping the box office for the entire year. Céline Dion, meanwhile, was the first international artist to reach number 1 on the Oricon Singles Chart in over ten years with 'To Love You More', thanks to its appearance on the soundtrack of TV drama *Koibito Yo*. In the world of manga, *Initial D* had just appeared, and *Cardcaptor Sakura* and *Old Boy* were on the verge of doing so.

Most importantly, in the year or so since the release of Sony's PlayStation, the polygonal splendour of games like *Ace Combat*, *Tekken*, *WipEout*, *Warhawk* and *Ridge Racer* had proved that games had crossed a major new technological frontier. Even on the Saturn (which, notoriously, hadn't been designed to handle all of those newly fashionable polygons), the likes of *Virtua Fighter 2* and *Virtua Cop* confirmed the ascendancy of three dimensions. Heck, even the SNES was getting in on the polygonal act with the *Donkey Kong Country* series, then about to receive its second chapter. But Masato Maegawa and his small band of fellow travellers at Treasure simply didn't care.

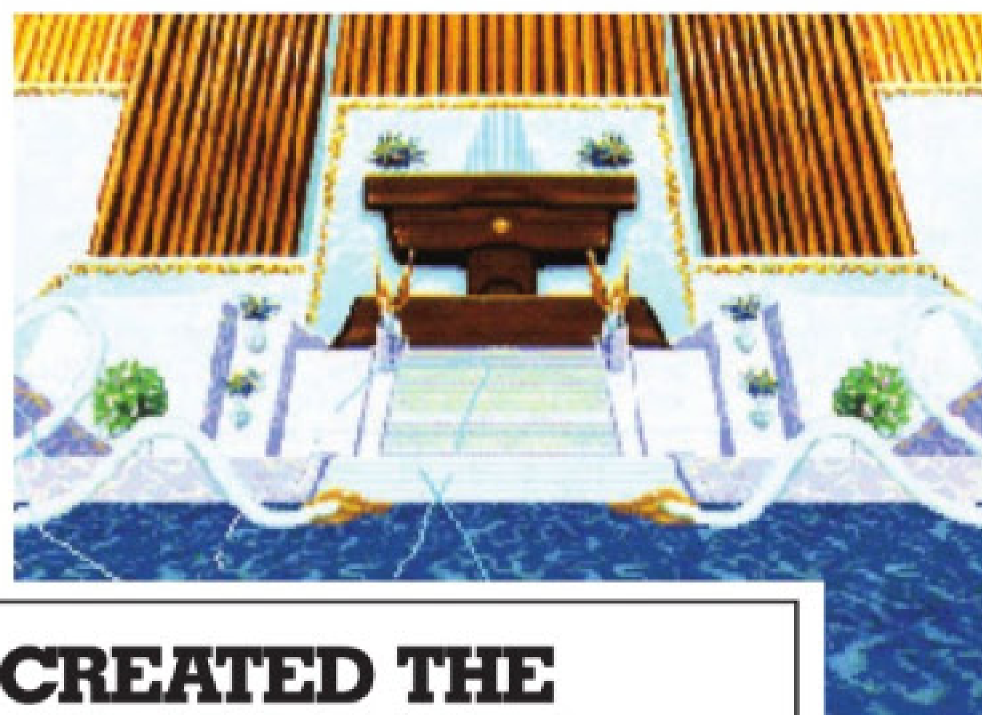
He didn't, and still doesn't, watch movies. He didn't, and still doesn't watch anime, CONTINUED >.

WE CREATED THE COMPANY TO MAKE THE GAMES WE LIKE IN THE WAY WE LIKE



Guardian Heroes' Undead Hero was a neat touch, an NPC ally that could be given simple commands by the player.















Way ahead of its time, *Guardian Heroes* blended the ageing scrolling fighter genre with RPG mechanics years before the current crop of XBLA games did the same.





As was fashionable with high-end 2D games of the time, *Guardian Heroes* enabled players to jump between several planes of perspective as and when they wanted to.





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: GRIZZLY

Easily my favourite game on the Sega Saturn. Nothing says 'chaotic fun' more than a ninja dressed in green, juggling a screen filled with enemies.

Posted by: MFNICK

Had no idea what to expect when I first put it in, but as soon as I beat up the first dude and shouted, 'It's like *Streets Of Rage*!' I was immediately won over. Then I found out how to control the big gold dude with the huge sword, all the moves, all the different dialogue options. Next thing I know I've lost hundreds of hours finding everything in the game and exploring the story with all the characters. I even spent a ridiculous amount of time in the battle arena where I was able to play as all the awesome, screen-filling mofos from the story mode. This was the game I played most with my mates, one of my favourite of all time, and the first that made me take notice of Treasure, as I'd never played their games until this.

Posted by: UNKNOWNQUANTITY

Definitely one of the games all Sega Saturn owners should own, and a defining moment in 2D side-scrolling beat-'em-ups. I don't think I ever found every game path, and the multiple endings made more playthroughs a must – and playing with mates was always fun. It was like playing an animated *Golden Axe*, but with cooler characters and a much better storyline – from memory, something about spirits and a special sword? Heck, just writing this makes me want to set my Sega Saturn back up...





■ The interior of Treasure's office pays tribute to many of the developer's past glories. It's easy to forget just how many great games it's made.



read comics, listen to music, or even play too many games outside of his favoured genres. Instead, he and the tiny team of prodigiously talented pixel geniuses at Treasure were quietly getting on with making some of the greatest games to appear on Sega's ill-fated console – some of the greatest games in videogame history, in fact. One of those games, which you might have heard of, was *Radiant Silvergun*. Another was *Guardian Heroes*.

Guardian Heroes owed its name to Treasure's earlier Mega Drive title, *Gunstar Heroes*, but borrowed little else apart from a single cameo from that game's final boss. Oh, and Treasure's trademark ability to confound expectation and twist genres into almost unrecognisable shapes, creating beautiful, joyful confusion and mayhem in the process. *Guardian Heroes* is the last great scrolling beat-'em-up, as joyful to play today as it was back then, regularly appearing on lists of the best Saturn games, and still capable of fetching prices of over $100 (or £60) on auction sites. And yet, at a time when the polygon had just proved itself as the apex predator of the videogame ecosystem, *Guardian Heroes* was resolutely and unapologetically 2D.



MASATO MAEGAWA
CEO, Treasure

■■■ ASIDE FROM THE terrible artwork, the US box gave a small hint of what to expect from the game: "An Enchanted Sword falls into the hands of a band of young heroes. Assisted by a Knight and a Golden Undead Warrior, they begin their quest to change the fate of their entire kingdom." The European release came a bit closer to distilling the glorious havoc that the game was about to unleash on your screen: "Hack, slash and burn through hordes of androids, zombie warriors and goblins as you select your route through over 30 gripping levels, or battle it out in frantic six-player mode with over 45 characters to choose from!" Even that, though, is just a faint echo of the epic explosion of brilliance that *Guardian Heroes* was about to let loose on an unsuspecting world. This was the side-scrolling beat-'em-up taken to its illogical conclusion: complete and utter insanity, and completely and utterly compelling.

Wandering into Treasure's current headquarters, a few blocks away from a completely average intersection in suburban Tokyo, gives few hints that you are about to enter the heart of such an especially untrammelled, unhinged variety of videogame genius. Stepping out of the elevator into a tiny corridor and then into a small, slightly tatty reception area, you could easily be entering a small-town estate agent's office, or an accountant's – an impression that is only slightly dispelled by the videogame posters and the couple of coin-op cabinets that line the walls of an otherwise nondescript boardroom. So, when CEO Masato Maegawa enters the room, it is almost no surprise that he sports a sensible haircut and suit to complete the illusion of normality. Appearances can be deceiving, however. Maegawa is truly an enfant terrible of electronic art, and there are few people better placed to tell the story behind the creation of *Guardian Heroes*.

"When we made the game we had already created a game for the Mega Drive called *Yu Yu Hakusho*, and we wanted to evolve that to create a more original game – to develop even more madness and excess," he says, explaining the genesis of the game. "That was how the project started. And that was the moment when absolutely everybody was creating 3D games, so we wanted to make a 2D game." Indeed, then, as now, Treasure, paid little heed to commercial pressure or prevailing fashion: "We created the company to make the games we like in the way we like. And nothing has changed since we started the company," Maegawa says, summing up the company's boldly admirable philosophy – a philosophy made carnate in *Guardian Heroes*.

Like all other beat-'em-ups, the premise was simple: move from one side of the screen to the other, smashing anything in the way. But added to this were tweaks that upgraded the combat mechanics to levels of complexity that matched those of fully-fledged static beat-'em-ups like *Street Fighter*, yet still plunged players into headlong violence against thronging hordes of assailants.

Instead of being free to wander around the screen and take on those roving mobs, players could switch between three planes of movement by tapping the Saturn pad's shoulder buttons, which freed the developer to use the rest of the pad to enable more sophisticated, *Street-Fighter*-style commands and combos, and even for characters to leap and jump. Melee attacks combined with magic strikes that were contagious, snaking and chaining their way across the screen as they infected everyone in cascading waves of delirious onscreen effects. It was a bedlam and anarchy that was matched by a development process that was every bit as haphazard – at least compared to the modern, regimented approach to development. "We didn't use any special tools to make the game," explains Maegawa. "The game design document was just a three page outline. We just sort of created the game using trial and error."

Perhaps the game's innovations are why it's still fondly remembered today, surmises Maegawa, when pressed on the issue. "Compared to standard 2D-scroll action titles, we tried to implement several unique systems to make it more chaotic and colourful, like the three layers, the vertical movement, and we tried to give gamers something unexpected. So maybe that's why it had a strong impact on players."

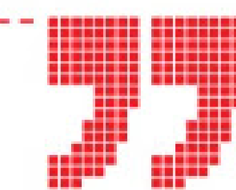
■■■ INDEED, IT WASN'T only a case of more advanced combat: *Guardian Heroes* wasn't just a superbly honed scrolling beat-'em up; it was also a genre-bending one, borrowing a character development system from RPGs and throwing in a multitude of different paths, endings and unlockable characters. The game started with a fairly traditional band of adventurers – warrior, wizard, ninja and cleric – but if you wanted to unlock the full complement of characters for the multiplayer, you had to choose the right path and achieve the right ending.

And yes, it also featured a multiplayer mode that was every bit as hectic and silly and confusing as the single-player game – especially if you owned a multitap, which enabled six players CONTINUED>.



■ The roster of 45 playable characters was, and still is, pretty comprehensive, ranging from the rather unpromising 'fat citizen' and 'weak citizen' to the rather more mean and nasty goblins and zombies.

WE TRIED TO IMPLEMENT UNIQUE SYSTEMS TO MAKE IT MORE CHAOTIC AND COLOURFUL





■ *Guardian Heroes* didn't just have huge screen-filling bosses; it had huge screen-filling bosses you could play as in the brilliant versus mode.

Double the fun

■ THE SATURN version of *Guardian Heroes* required about 70 people to put together, all told – thanks mostly to the outsourced team working on the in-game full motion video.

The Xbox Live version, by contrast, has taken only seven people to convert – but you needn't worry about anything going missing in the process. The Xbox Live version contains everything that the Saturn version did, and more besides: "All of the elements you've seen in the Sega Saturn version will be in the 360 version as well," says Maegawa. "However, we've been adding many new elements, such as 12-player online battle. So it's not just a port; it's going to be a new game as well. As for whether there are any Easter eggs, I'm not going to tell you."

WHAT THEY SAID...



It's our cover and we've given it eight pages! What more evidence do you need to tell you that we've been gripped by Guardian Heroes fever?

Computer & Video Games, March 1996





TREASURE BOX

■ TREASURE IS TRULY a treasure; a tiny, independent developer, founded in 1992 by a group of former Konami employees and as fiercely committed, today, to the independent spirit that fuelled them back then. Ignoring passing fads and fashionable trends, they have consistently created games that push the envelope of artistic ingenuity, resulting in some amazing masterpieces and remarkable oddities, and occasionally threatening the very existence of the company. "As I mentioned earlier, our policy is to create games that we want to create, which might lead to financial crisis occasionally," Maegawa tells us.

"However, we've been in this industry for 18 years now." Indeed a softography that includes the likes of *Radiant Silvergun*, *Ikaruga*, *Bangai-O*, *Alien Soldier*, *Sin And Punishment* and *Gradius V* suggests that the company's doing something right.



■ From Ginjirou's spinning attack to Randy's magic, *Guardian Heroes* added an extra layer of complexity to the relative simplicity of more standard scrolling beat-'em-ups.

to take part at once, in the sort of unadulterated craziness that prefigured the massively multiplayer deathmatches that are more commonplace in today's more connected gaming age. It was also full of the sort of glorious gaming non sequiturs for which Treasure is occasionally fond of, full of mismatches and unbalances – absurdly underpowered characters competing with preposterously planet-sized ones – making it every bit as comic as it was competitive. It also cemented multiplayer as Maegawa's personal favourite part of the game: "The story mode was fun, but at that time there weren't any other games where you could play together with six people, and playing together with six people really brought the mayhem to a crescendo. So of course I like the story mode but, to be honest, six-player versus mode is the bit which I like the most."

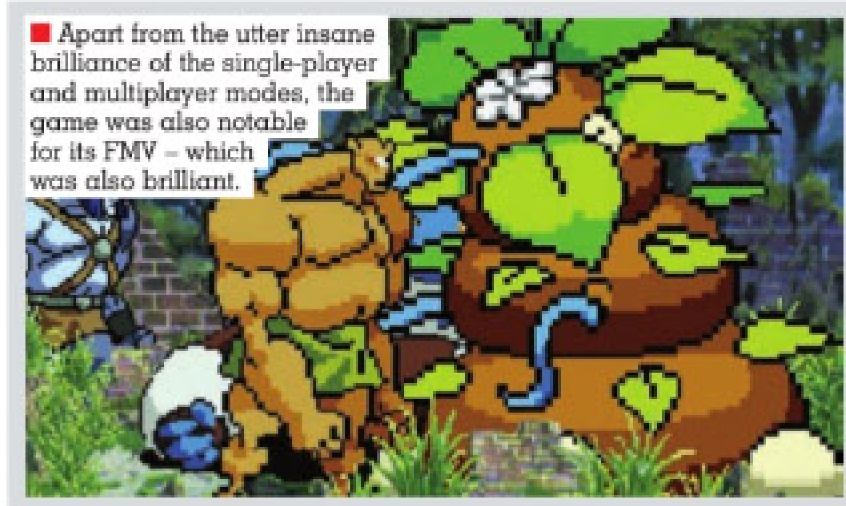
Perhaps the only major drawback with *Guardian Heroes* – apart from its capacity to hurt your eyes with the sheer intensity of the action – was that, like many of Treasure's games, it was released in limited numbers, which partly explains the high prices it still fetches on the internet (though that isn't to say that you can't get it for decent prices if you shop around).

■■■ SO WHY ARE Treasure games so rare? Maegawa laughs. "Well, that's because the number of orders we received for the game wasn't very high, so when all of the hardcore fans went out and bought it, it sold out. So I think that's why it still has a premium price when you see it on web auctions." That limited availability also partly explains the relatively muted reception that greeted the game upon its release. From Treasure's perspective, the sales and reviews were perfectly acceptable. "The sales were pretty good, so we were fairly satisfied," says Maegawa. "And the reviews… of course the reviews contained various opinions, but in general the game received good reviews, so we were pretty happy."

But there were certainly some reviewers and players who felt confounded by some of Treasure's design choices, as he goes on to explain: "At that moment there were a whole bunch of one-on-one 2D fighting games where the characters and combat were balanced pretty well, but we wanted to create more multi-character, more chaotic games, and we gave players the freedom to create their own game balance – they have the option to change it from the menus. So some people were not very impressed with that. But that was just a minority, and I think the majority of people who played the game seemed to like it."

WHEN ALL OF OUR HARDCORE FANS WENT OUT AND BOUGHT IT, IT SOLD OUT

Still, it's only with the passage of time that the game seems to have finally acquired its richly deserved recognition as one of the greatest games of all time. And yet, like many of Treasure's games, few other developers seemed to draw any lessons from its spiky virtuosity – except, perhaps the lesson that Treasure's particular brand of development genius is impossible for others to recreate. In spite of the way the developer seems to be able to combine wholly original game designs and bafflingly complicated onscreen overkill with a crowd-pleasing simplicity and spontaneity, achieving such a marvellous sweet spot of success in the process, no other developer ever seems willing (or perhaps able) to draw inspiration from the sublime brilliance of the likes of *Guardian Heroes*.



■ Apart from the utter insane brilliance of the single-player and multiplayer modes, the game was also notable for its FMV – which was also brilliant.

So it still stands alone at the pinnacle of its genre. There was a sequel, of sorts, but it failed to match the heights scaled by the original: *Guardian Heroes Advance* was released on the GBA in 2004 (eight years after the original), one of Treasure's rare duff notes in a softography of otherwise symphonic brilliance. It maintained the mix of melee and magic, but transported the action from the medieval fantasy scenario of the first game to a futuristic sci-fi setting. It also lost the tri-planar movement in favour of a more standard interpretation of the scrolling beat-'em up genre, disappointing reviewers in the process.





■ "With this title Sega let us work fairly freely," says Maegawa, explaining Treasure's relationship with the game's publisher. "At that time everybody was making 3D games, so the fact that Sega also saw the value in 2D games allowed us to work on it very easily."

■■■ EVEN SO, IT'S not so much that the game is bad; more that it just fails to live up to the benchmark established by the brilliant original – fails to live up to the thousands of small joys that you could experience on the Saturn. The almost comically inappropriate music. Juggling enemies to rack up experience (at the risk of bad karma affecting your ending). The FMV cinematics. The character designs; with sprites drawn from Treasure's seemingly inexhaustible stores of perfectly designed little pixel people. The way the screen zoomed in and out to focus your attention on the chaos. The ongoing assistance provided by The Undead Hero – surely the least annoying AI partner in the history of games ("We put in The Undead Hero to help out people who are no good at action games," explains Maegawa). Just the sheer ridiculousness of not being able to see your character because of the incredible multitude of enemies and effects crowding the screen.

These are the things that were missing from the sequel. And with no current plans for any further sequels (although when asked about this Maegawa turns to our Sega PR chaperone to give a quick comic plea: "We really want to make one please, Mr Sega!"), it means the only way to enjoy them again is to play the original. Until later this year, that is, when the game will be released on Xbox Live Arcade, a feat that shouldn't go unrecognized, given that the Saturn is notoriously one of the hardest systems to port from.

"The biggest challenge was that when we were done with the Sega Saturn version we stored all of the source code onto DAT," explains Maegawa, apparently confirming that the company's approach to the archiving process is as haphazard as the action in some of its games. "So at the beginning of the project we had to retrieve the source code, but we had no environment to read the tapes! So actually we had to borrow equipment from Sega – and Sega had to gather various different parts from different divisions so that we could create one complete environment to play them back. But somehow we were able to retrieve the source code. So actually that was the toughest part of porting the game to the Xbox."

Apart from that, apparently, the process has been plain sailing. So even if you can't afford the eBay prices, you will soon be able to savour a taste of one of the Saturn's most entertaining masterpieces. And you really do owe it to yourself to try it. It truly is a rare gem of a game.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Treasure's first stab at the beat-'em-up, *Yu Yu Hakusho*, was based on a Japanese comic, but was sadly never released in the West.



Apart from the name, the official sequel to *Guardian Heroes* bore little relationship to the classic original – more's the pity.



CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: ZX Spectrum
Year: 1990
Publisher: Domark
Developer: Mind's Eye

S.T.U.N. RUNNER

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Hard Drivin' Hardware Year: 1989 Publisher: Atari Games Developer: In-house

RELEASED INTO ARCADES in 1989, *S.T.U.N. Runner* was a popular racer in which players got to steer a state-of-the-art sled through a series of snaking tunnel networks. In keeping with its ultramodern theme, it looked astonishing thanks to impressive polygon visuals courtesy of a sophisticated graphics engine first unveiled by Atari Games with *Hard Drivin'* a year earlier.

But while *Hard Drivin'* looked great, selling itself as the world's first 3D driving simulator, there were many who felt its gameplay was lacking in excitement. No such criticism could be levelled at *S.T.U.N. Runner* though. Here, Atari injected a heavy dose of thrill into its newfangled tech by doing away with a lot of the realism that had governed the gameplay of *Hard Drivin'*. In addition to its futuristic setting, *S.T.U.N. Runner* didn't concern players with normally important driving necessities like acceleration, gear-changing or even braking; instead players simply had to maintain their speed around the game's tubular courses by keeping to the best racing line (usually the outside walls), hitting boost stars, and blasting away anything that was unfortunate enough to get in their way.

With its satisfying blend of exhilarating gameplay and attractive graphics, *S.T.U.N. Runner* became a popular hit for Atari Games. And it was Brit coding shop Domark that secured the home computer rights, and developer Mind's Eye that was left scratching its head as it worked out how it was going to somehow squeeze the fastest and most visually impressive arcade game of the time onto a cassette tape.

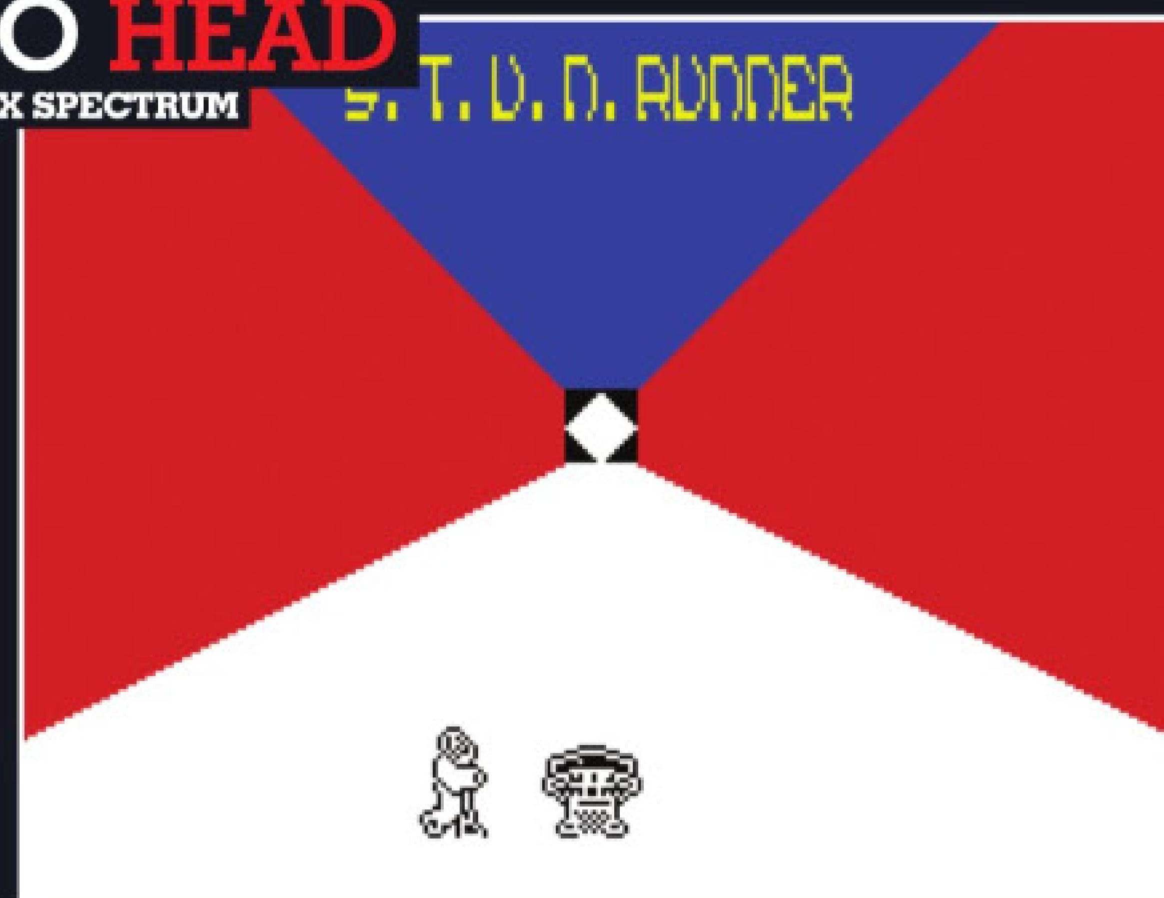
Knowing that polygons were far beyond the reach of the humble Speccy, Mind's Eye was forced to come up with a visual workaround. Its answer: rather than tunnel networks, have the player's vehicle travel into different monochromatic dartboards instead – dartboards constructed from bitmaps that would flash really, really fast so as to confuse the player's addled brain into thinking it was on a pier somewhere playing the actual arcade game.

It was an unusual strategy, and sadly one that was unsuccessful. Reviewers of the time simply complained of eyestrain, were left questioning why home conversions were even considered, and then finished off their damning appraisals with some very low scores.

HEAD TO HEAD

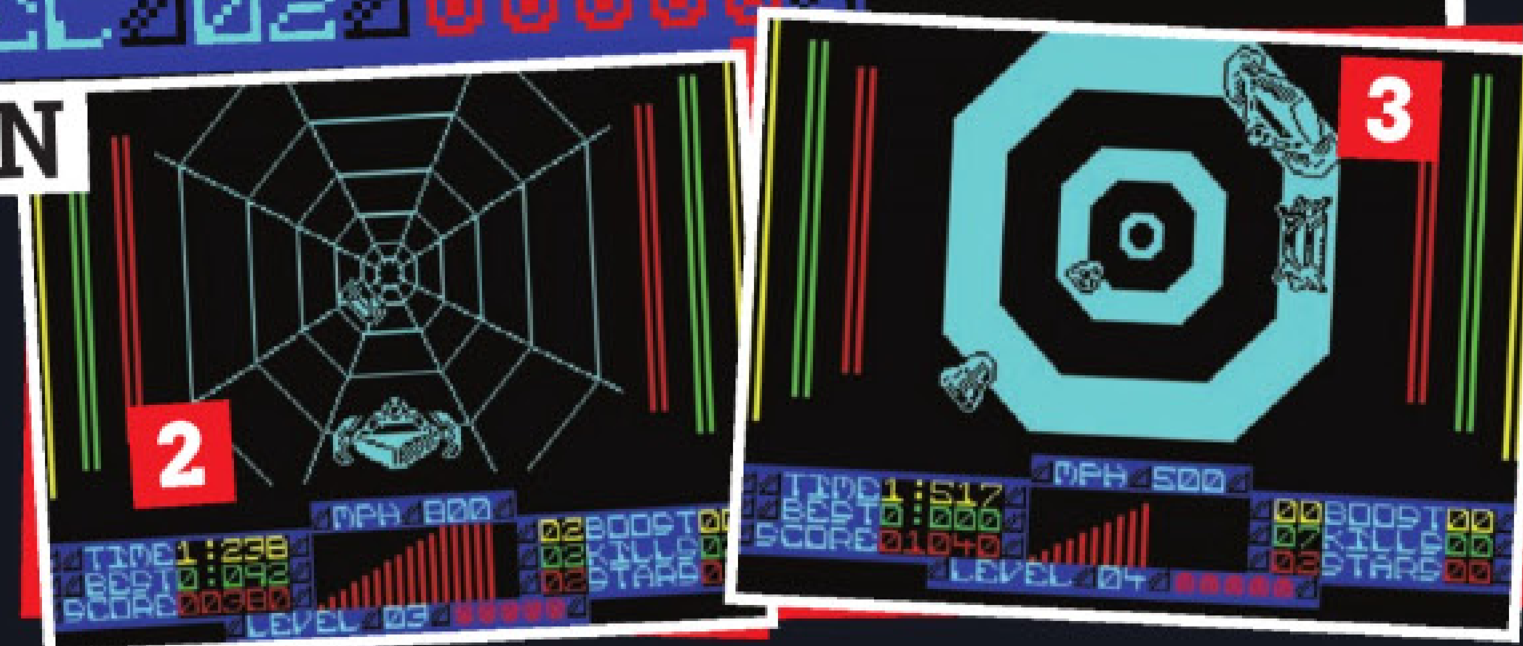
ARCADE / ZX SPECTRUM







THE BREAKDOWN



1 In the coin-op these sections were – and looked like – unfinished sections of tunnel track, but in the Spectrum port they're just flat bits of open road. Clearly green and barren so as to serve as mental respite from the chaotic tunnel sections, they also probably saved Domark the need to slap a health warning sticker on the game box.

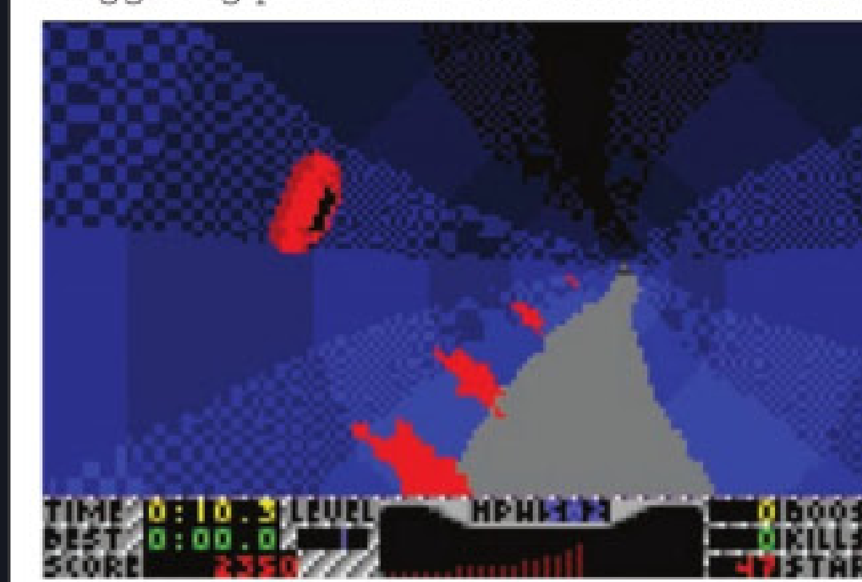
2 One of the key racing strategies in the original was that players had to ensure their sled kept to the optimum racing line as it scudded around the course. That mechanic is less significant in this conversion; our sled reached the fourth race without us having to press a single button, and got to race seven with us simply using fire.

3 Static screenshots cannot show how visually uncomfortable these tunnel sections of the game are. Take our word for it though; playing this game feels a bit like you're participating in some kind of psychological test, or that you have stumbled across Heaven for a super clubber/Max Power fanatic – AKA Hell for everyone else.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: Lynx Year: 1991 Publisher: Atari Developer: In-house

The Lynx is home to some fantastic arcade conversions, and this staggering port of *S.T.U.N. Runner* ranks as one of its best. The only vaguely decent conversion made, it was developed in-house at Atari, and though it lacks polygonal racetracks, you'd struggle to notice. It looks, plays and sounds just like the original.





Hall Of Fame... Superfrog

Nintendo had Mario and Sega had Sonic. But what did Commodore have? games™ makes the case for Superfrog, the Amiga's greatest platform game hero

GAMING IN THE EARLY Nineties was largely about mascots. If your console of choice didn't have one then you just couldn't attract mainstream appeal. The SNES and Mega Drive became household names thanks to Mario and Sonic, but where did this leave the home computers, without a first-party publisher to create a system-selling character?

The result, rather ironically, is that those systems ended up with multiple mascots, as third-party developers lined up to create the next big character. Commodore's Amiga had its fair share with the likes of Zool and James Pond, but the best of all was arguably Superfrog.

Born in the offices of Yorkshire's Team17 Software, *Superfrog* couldn't have come from a more suitable studio. The indie developer had, since 1991, gained a reputation for bringing arcade and console-quality titles to the Amiga and outshining many official coin-op conversions in the process. *Alien Breed* was *Gauntlet* in space. *Project-X* was Europe's answer to the Japanese shoot-'em-up. And *Superfrog* would allow computer gamers to enjoy the side-scrolling platform game boom without having to buy a console.

Brainstormed through the doodles of *Alien Breed* artist Rico Holmes, Superfrog was originally named Chuck, presumably because of his sidekick, Spud, a little green blob that could be thrown at enemies. As the design progressed, Spud remained but Chuck was renamed Superfrog by Team17 head Martyn Brown. In a typically British twist, it was decided that Superfrog would find his powers by drinking Newcastle Brown Ale and would gain a Geordie accent too.

With Team17 well known throughout the games industry as a studio that liked to have a drink or two, the Newcastle Brown Ale connection was hardly surprising. But it was a connection that, sadly, didn't make it into the final game. After securing a licensing deal with Beecham, Superfrog's drink of choice was changed to the much more family-friendly Lucozade and the Geordie accent was dropped, despite the fact that the fizzy energy drink was first created in Newcastle.

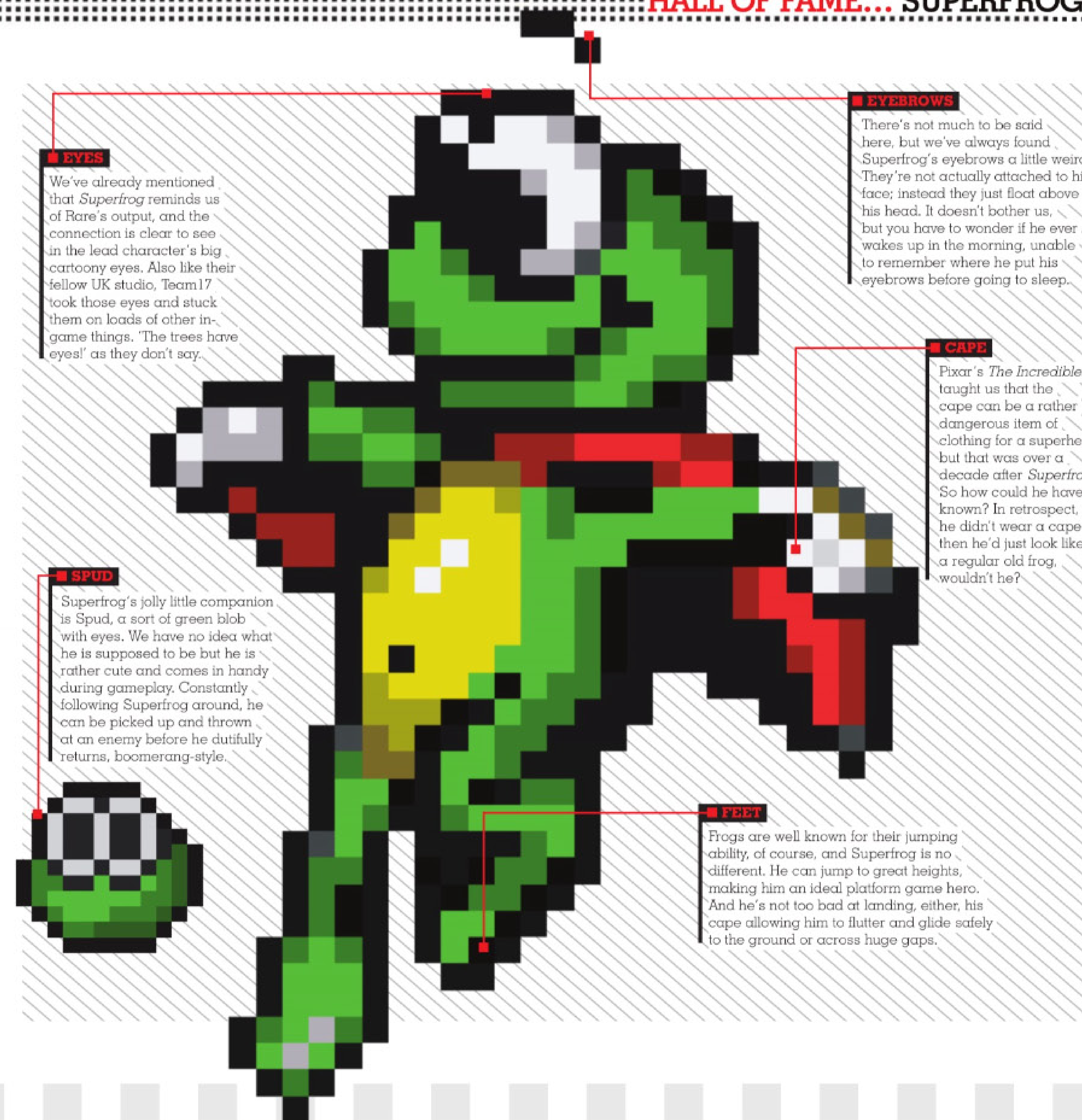
While the origin stories of most game characters were told in instruction manuals at the time, *Superfrog* was slightly ahead of the pack thanks to a hand-painted introductory cinematic, created by popular Amiga animator Eric Schwartz. Partly inspired by *The Frog Prince* and *The Wizard Of Oz*, the story sees a princess kidnapped by an evil witch, her prince turned into a frog and left alone at the River Of Despair. Just when he seems to have become resigned to his fate, the frog prince spots a bottle of Lucozade floating down the river, pulls it out it, necks the syrupy orange liquid and unexpectedly transforms into Superfrog before impulsively flying off to rescue his betrothed.

The game itself was one of the better platform games on the Amiga. Loosely comparable to *Sonic The Hedgehog*, it had enough of its own ideas to stand out from the pack. A wealth of secret areas – and the need to collect coins to open the level exit – made it more of an exploration game than a straight speed-run, and in this respect it had more in common with a Rare title than anything created by Nintendo or Sega. It also had a similar sense of humour, with the Team's self-recorded fart noises providing the sound effect for squished enemies and an inter-level fruit machine mini-game retaining that distinct British feel that had threatened to disappear with Superfrog's Geordie accent.

THOSE WHO FINISHED *Superfrog* were rewarded with an unexpected ending. Upon rescuing the princess, our amphibious hero receives a kiss, but instead of turning back to a prince his girlfriend transforms into a frog and the game ends, leaving the story open for a sequel.

That follow-up never happened, though. The game itself was popular with both press and gamers and was later ported to both CD32 and PC, but its success was eclipsed by Team17's phenomenally popular *Worms* series. The planned sequel, an isometric adventure called *Frog And Ball*, was cancelled mid-development and Superfrog was never seen again, aside from minor cameos in *Worms 3D* and *Worms Blast* that went mostly unnoticed.

The risk-averse era of 1995-2005 meant that few publishers would have dared take a chance on a *Superfrog* sequel, and Team17 instead focussed on more lucrative franchises like *Worms* and *Lemmings*. The situation has changed slightly in recent years, however, with the studio moving toward self-publishing and reviving the long dormant *Alien Breed* series. Team17 is now in a position where calculated risks are possible, but is still reluctant to bet the farm on a character that hasn't been seen since 1993. Still, the developer tells us that a *Superfrog* sequel is the studio's most requested revival after *Alien Breed*, so there may still be hope for the little energy drink addict yet.



>. MAGIC MOMENTS



The frog prince discovers a lovely bottle of Lucozade floating in the River of Despair.



The Lucozade occasionally appears in-game. Drink it to replenish health. Just like real life!



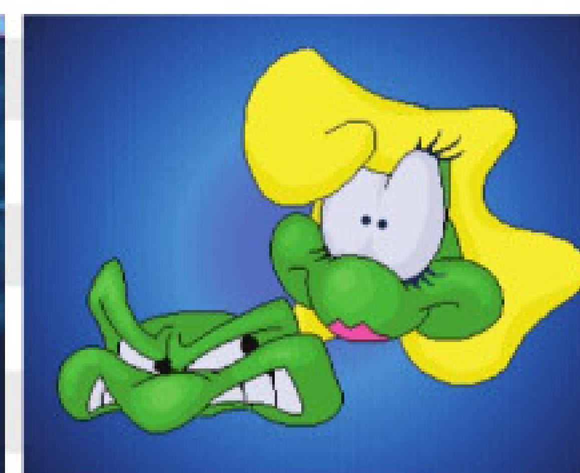
Superfrog indulges his gambling addiction by playing a fruit machine. Is Lucozade a fruit?



A secret area in World 5 reveals an unfinished part of the level. Was Team17 in the pub that day?



One of the last levels, called Project F, is a fun homage to previous Team 17 title *Project X*.



Superfrog's ending sees the princess turned into a frog. Our hero isn't too happy about it.



Superfrog appears as a secret playable character in puzzle game *Worms Blast*.



A reward animation in *Worms 3D* sees a Worm turn into Superfrog after being struck by lightning.

The Soft Sell

The advent of product placement in videogames turned a handful of game heroes into fizzy pop addicts and alcoholics. Here are a few of the most notable gaming tipples and the effect they had on the gameplay

1. KOOL-AID

Vintage – 1983
Appears in – Kool-Aid Man

Does anyone actually know what Kool-Aid is? Here in the UK, it's not something we were ever likely to find out… at least until *Kool-Aid Man* came along. The Atari 2600 game saw the little jug-faced hero protecting a swimming pool from the water-stealing Thirsties and replenishing his powers by collecting the ingredients of Kool-Aid. Those ingredients were 'water', 'sugar', and somewhat confusingly, 'Kool Aid'. So I guess we won't ever know what it's made from after all.

2. BUDWEISER

Vintage – 1983
Appears in – Tapper

YOU HAVE to feel sorry for *Tapper*'s bartender. He spends all day long serving glasses of Budweiser to the pickiest customers, who insist that the glasses be slid across huge bars. He's on his feet all day, and only gets to enjoy a single glass of the cold frothy stuff at the end of his long, hectic shift. Still, at least he got to have a taste of alcohol at all. The kid-friendly 1984 version of *Tapper* abandoned the Budweiser license altogether and the bartender could only enjoy a glass of generic, unbranded root beer at the end of the day. His Japanese counterpart, meanwhile, served and drank the country's own Suntory.

3. LUCOZADE

Vintage – 1993
Appears in – Superfrog

ANOTHER GAME hero to cruelly have alcohol snatched away from him, Superfrog began life as a Newcastle Brown Ale-swilling Geordie, but a license agreement with Team17 meant that he ended up a Lucozade addict by the time of the game's release. One of the world's original 'energy drinks', Lucozade literally replenished Superfrog's energy as well as causing him to transform from frog to super-frog in the first place. The drink also appeared in the game's fruit machine bonus rounds. Line up three cans of Lucozade and you'd unlock a special code, allowing you to skip to that level the next time you loaded up the game.

7. RED BULL

Vintage – 2003 **Appears in** – Worms 3D

TEAM17 CAME full circle in 2003. Ten years after Superfrog made his name downing Lucozade, the developer's more famous mascots, the Worms, brought the idea bang up to date with the modern era's defining energy drink. Red Bull was a subtle piece of product-placement compared to the use of Lucozade in *Superfrog*, but was used in a very similar way. Drink a can and your Worm will recover a few hit points. He won't, however, suffer from a debilitating sugar crash a few minutes later.

6. PEPSI

Vintage – 1999
Appears in – Pepsiman

ANOTHER SOFT drink mascot to get his own game, Pepsiman appeared in Pepsi's Japanese TV adverts during the Nineties. A sort of bumbling superhero, the faceless character would turn up to help thirsty people, give them something to drink and comically injure himself in the process. His official PlayStation game saw him avoiding various obstacles on his way to a rescue, without sustaining any embarrassing injuries along the way. His reward for all this hard work? A nice can of Pepsi, of course. Pepsiman also appeared as a secret character in the Japanese version of *Fighting Vipers* but the character has never made it over to the UK… Not that we miss his rather aggressive promotion techniques.

5. COCA-COLA

Vintage – 1994
Appears in – Coca-Cola Kid

THERE ARE tons of games that feature Coca-Cola, or so it seems. In actual fact, titles like *Pac-Man Plus* and *Two Crude Dudes* only feature drinks that are supposed to look like Coke but are not officially licensed. If you're looking for 'the real thing' then look no further than *Coca-Cola Kid*, a Japan-only Game Gear game that came free with a red, Coca-Cola-branded Game Gear console. The game itself is actually a fairly good platform game, with *Strider*-style hanging and wall-jumping abilities. The Coke, predictably enough, is collected in cups to increase energy.

4. 7UP

Vintage – 1993 **Appears in** – Cool Spot

COOL SPOT is an unusual game, not just because it featured a real-life fizzy drink, but also because its star was already the mascot of said drink. An anthropomorphised version of the red spot that appears in the 7UP logo, Cool Spot appeared in American TV ads for the drink in the late Eighties and soon got his own game, courtesy of *Earthworm Jim* creator David Perry. Strangely, Cool Spot is never seen drinking 7UP, but he does surf into the game world on a huge bottle of the stuff during the introduction sequence. The European version, incidentally, featured unbranded green bottles because 7UP didn't want to associate Cool Spot with the brand in a region where Fido Dido had been the mascot for some time.



BEHIND THE SCENES

CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY

How the UK's favourite software house took an unfinished cutesy platform game and transformed it into the least-family-friendly mascot platformer ever to grace a Nintendo console



Released: 2001
Format: Nintendo 64
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Rare

KEY STAFF:

Chris Seavor
Project Lead and Game Designer

Chris Marlow
Programmer

Louise Ridegway
Animator

Robert Beanland
Composer and Sound Designer

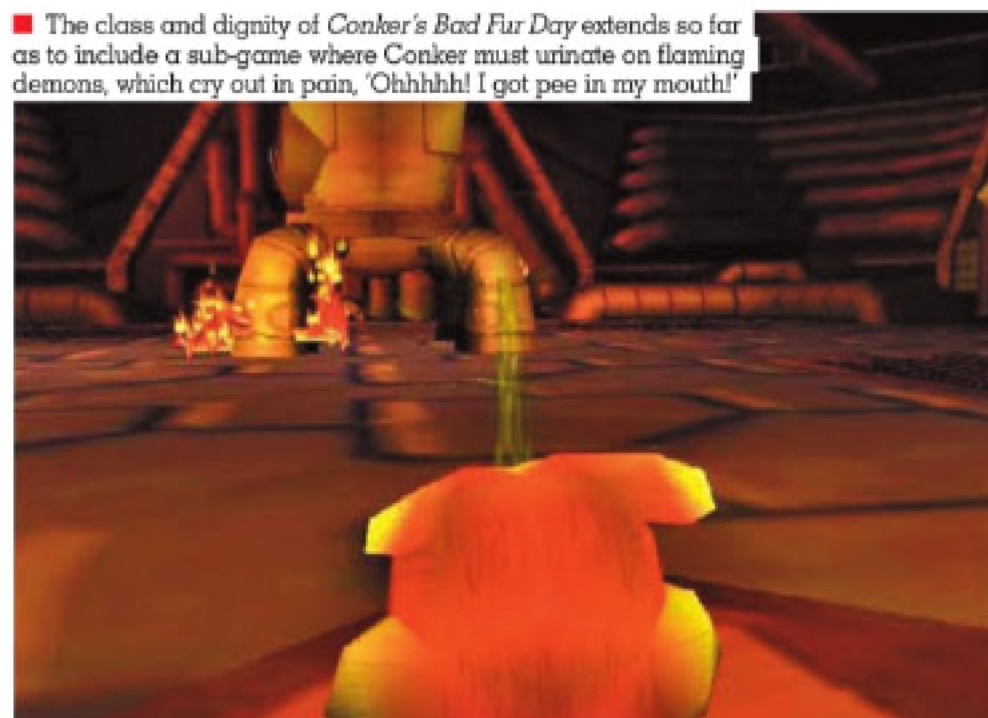
COMEDY IN GAMES. It's an issue well documented in the gaming media over recent times, to which the conclusion appears to be that gaming and comedy simply do not mesh. Indeed, most evidence would point to the fact. Nearly all games that try their hand at comedy end up failing badly for one of two reasons: either the game simply isn't funny or the humour detracts from the gameplay. Yet hidden within the industry's history are little gems that happily buck the trend. *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Grim Fandango*, *Psychonauts*, *Sam & Max*… all these titles had moments of comedic brilliance. Of the few humorous games in existence, it's *Conker's Bad Fur Day* that is arguably the most interesting. Not only was Rare's final Nintendo 64 game funny and brilliantly playable from start to finish, but it also had the most turbulent behind-the-scenes changes of any other N64 game.

At the turn of the millenium, Rare was synonymous with producing the absolute best of the best. *GoldenEye* perfected the first-person shooter, *Diddy Kong Racing* was arguably the best kart racing game available, *Banjo Kazooie* took the platform genre to new heights, while oddities like *Jet Force Gemini* and *Blast Corps* demonstrated a flair for the inventive. Anticipation for each and every Rare game was at fever pitch.

At E3 in 1997, it was *Twelve Tales'* time for unveiling. A cutesy platformer similar to *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Donkey Kong 64*, *Twelve Tales* was set to star Conker the Squirrel, a Rare-created mascot who, like Banjo, first appeared in *Diddy Kong Racing*. As Chris Marlow, programmer on *Bad Fur Day* (and Xbox remake, *Live & Reloaded*) recounts, "*Twelve Tales* involved collecting conkers and CONTINUED >.

THE TEAM WERE NEVER COMFORTABLE WITH THE DIRECTION OF TWELVE TALES

The class and dignity of *Conker's Bad Fur Day* extends so far as to include a sub-game where Conker must urinate on flaming demons, which cry out in pain, 'Ohhhhh! I got pee in my mouth!'



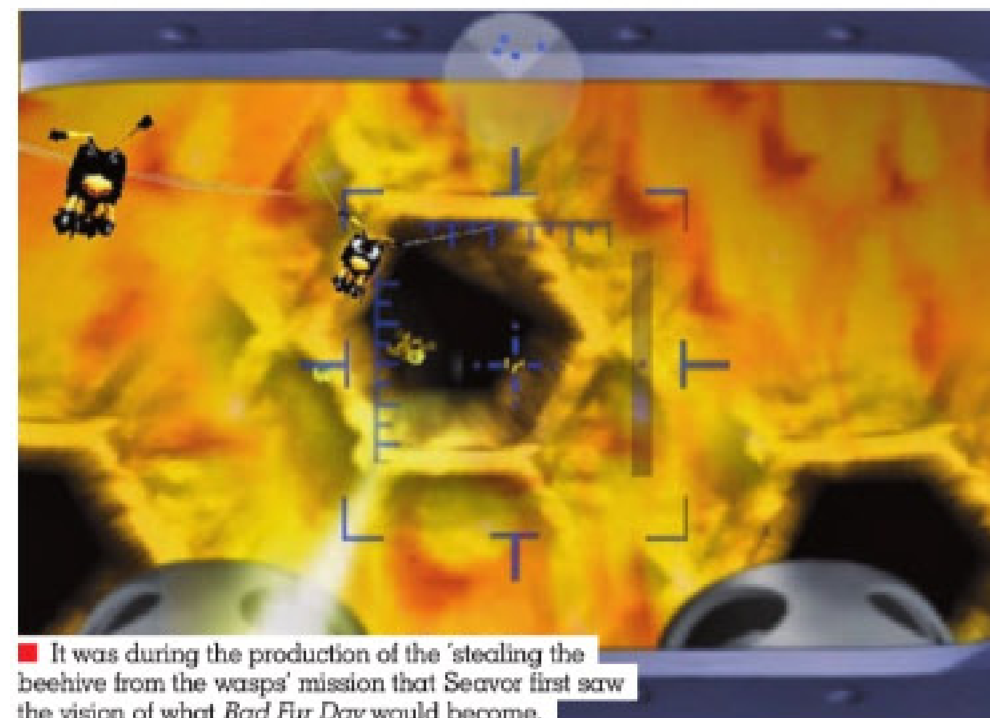










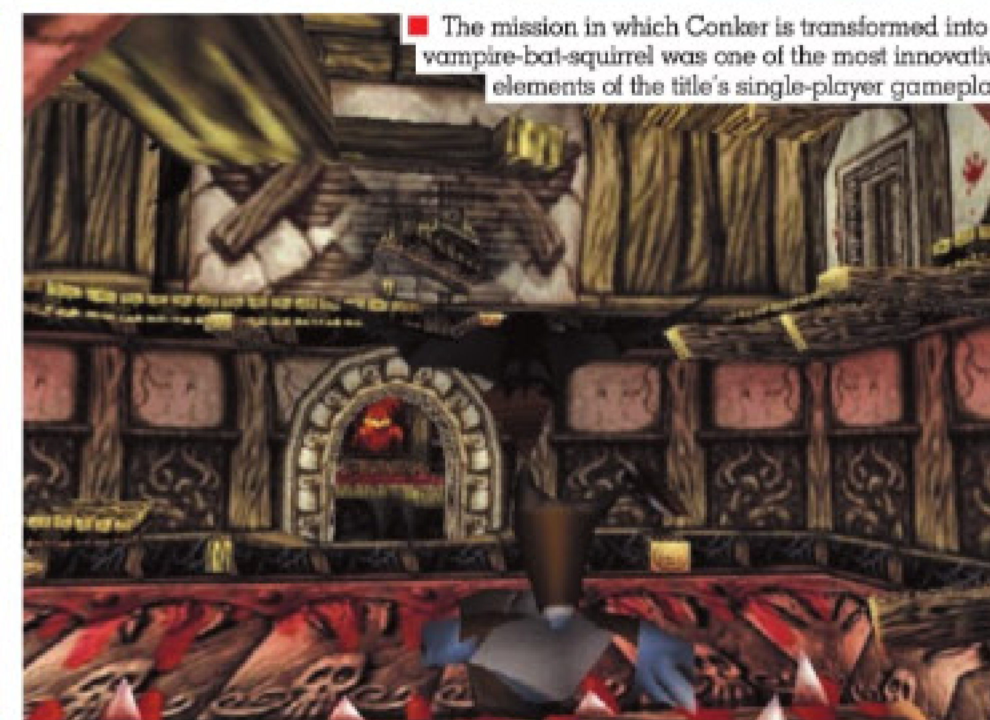


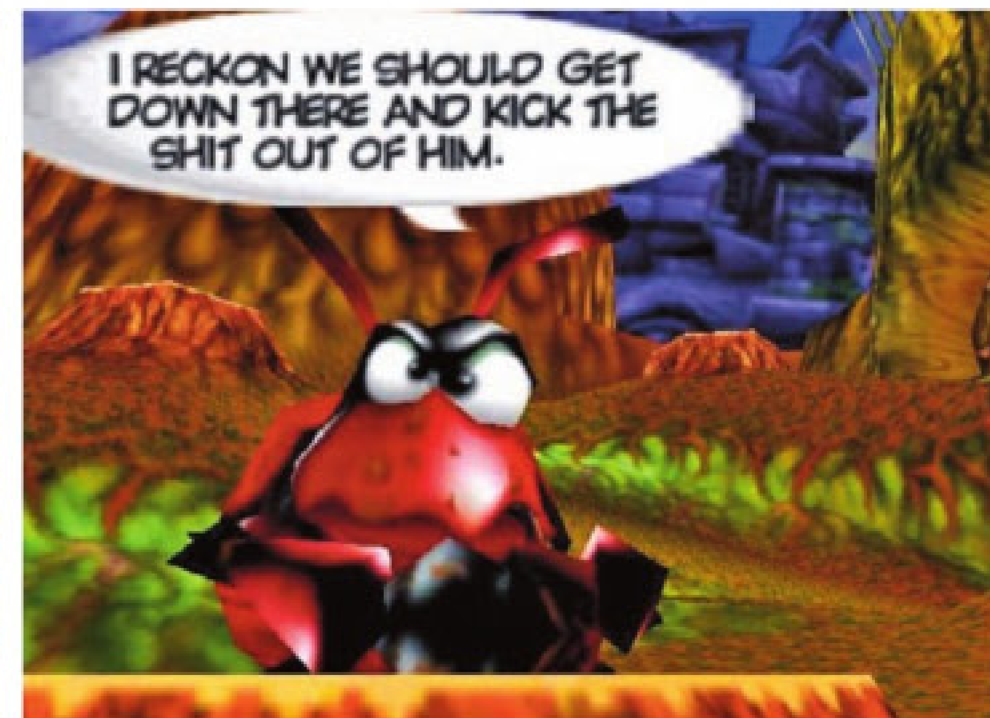
It was during the production of the 'stealing the beehive from the wasps' mission that Seavor first saw the vision of what *Bad Fur Day* would become.





The mission in which Conker is transformed into a vampire-bat-squirrel was one of the most innovative elements of the title's single-player gameplay.







FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: GRIZZLY

The game was fantastic; it wasn't big nor clever, but certainly made me laugh. The multiplayer was fun as well, especially the heist mode.

Posted by: YOSHIKART64

The Great Mighty Poo will forever live on in our hearts and minds.

Posted by: BLAKEY

This game will forever be in my memory as one of the most entertaining, innovative and laugh-out-laugh funny games ever made.

Posted by: BOSING

The toilet humour never wears thin. At the time, it felt like a masterclass in laughter, shock, level design and impressive graphic fidelity… Easily a personal favourite of mine in Rare's development chronology.

Posted by: MFNICK

I loved this game on N64! The comedy, while it could be quite childish, was still funny and tickled me (as well as being very British)! The characters were genius - the money that talked, the split-personality cog, the boiler with balls, sunflower with huge breasts, the building-sized Amazonian woman etc. Then there are the film references - a Terminator-style robot, *Alien*, *Matrix* (awesome section), *Saving Private Ryan* (again, awesome section!)... One of my favourite games of all time.

Posted by: SICKMOTH

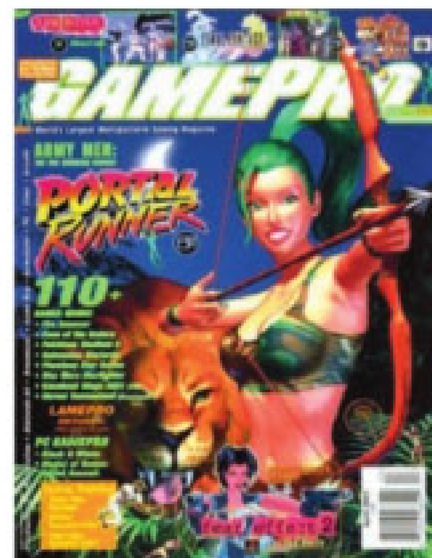
It was brilliant, a real departure from the norm, and with some excellent level design and unexpected delights along the way. A thoroughly good romp. It was tricky too, especially the poo tunnels level. I'd quite like to play it all over again now.

■ *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is stacked full of unforgettable moments, but if one segment of the game shines brightest, it has to be the Great Mighty Poo. Though the word might be used too cheaply these days, when it comes to giant, opera singing, demon poo, it can only be fair to say: genius.



WE WERE GIVEN AN UNHEARD OF AMOUNT OF FREE REIGN. VERY FEW SCENES GOT CUT

WHAT THEY SAID...



It's a brilliantly bizarre, insanely fun 3D-platformer extraordinaire, and a wonderfully ironic swan song for the N64

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items that would help Conker get around the world. Some gave you special abilities like digging tunnels, surviving high falls and so on. You progressed through various themed levels – Wood, Wild West, Prehistoric, Roman Gladiator – and solved simple puzzles." One might note from Marlow's generic description of *Twelve Tales* that the game was little cause for excitement. It was a solid investment by Rare: a platformer on a console known for its platform games, about a cute animal in cheerful environments and created by a studio that, with the *Donkey Kong Country* series, had proven its worth in the genre. As Chris Seavor, who went on to become project lead, states, "*Twelve Tales* was aimed at the perceived traditional Nintendo market, mainly kids to early teens. Its direction owed a lot to the influence of *Mario 64.*"

While *Twelve Tales* would likely have found commercial success, the underlying concern was that it wouldn't share the magic the developer was known for. Among the diverse artistry at Rare it will come as little surprise to hear composer and sound designer Robert Beanland recall, "The majority of the team were never comfortable with the cute platformer direction of *Twelve Tales.*" For the studio's reputation – and for the well-illustrated creative desire of the development team – it was essential that Conker should stand out from the crowd. The game needed a touch of flair. This it got when Chris Seavor stepped in as project lead and literally turned the game upside down.

"I remember working with Chris's first designed task – stealing the beehive from the wasps," says Marlow. "When we put together the cut-scene for completing the task, Chris said, 'Why don't we get some big guns to pop out and blow the wasps apart?!' We did it. We all laughed. The game's future tone and direction was set from that day on." It was this absurdist subversion of platform game tropes that would go on to dominate the remainder of the newly-retitled *Bad Fur Day*'s development.

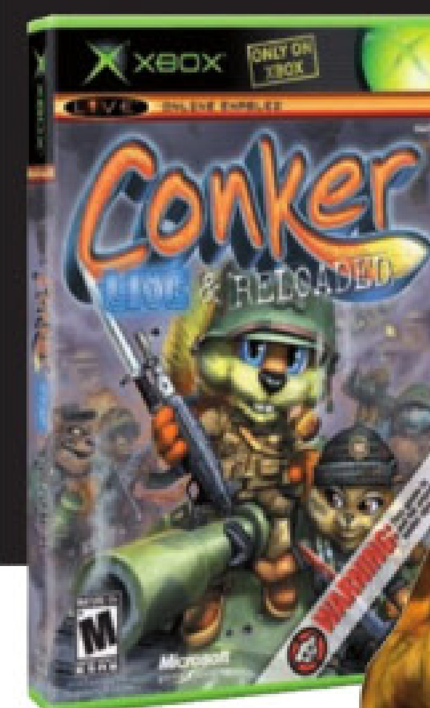
■■■ ALMOST IMMEDIATELY upon entering the project, Seavor had shown his guts and played his cards, for as animator Louise Ridgeway states, "The decision to reinvent the game and make it something we would want to play and be passionate about making was a brave one. Most companies like to take the 'safe' route when it comes to making games." Perhaps this is the reason why, when Rare announced that *Twelve Tales* was to become a controversial comedy-themed game, most observers assumed that the team was joking. In fact, so far was Rare from joking that, by Seavor's account, *Bad Fur Day* wasn't so much an evolution of *Twelve Tales* as it was a complete overhaul: "Aside from a squirrel called Conker, nothing to do with *Twelve Tales* ever made it over to what became *Bad Fur Day*", he explains. "*Twelve Tales* was scrapped, like many games are, and a new one was started. Fresh canvas, clean slate, very simple."

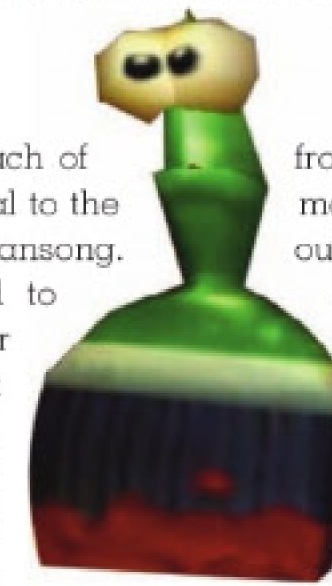
Without doubt this constituted a big risk, but as Seavor sees it, "There need to be games made for the love of 'em, rather than because some focus group has found out that ninja monkeys, sandbox environments and drop-ships sell lots of units."

His team agreed, as Beanland recalls. "Once Chris was in the driving seat the development team was a lot happier with the somewhat twisted path he took the game down." If not market research, what would Seavor count on for successful development? 'Talent, passion, and trust. It might not always work, but it's better than any alternatives I've seen so far.' To look back at the development of *Bad Fur Day*, one would have to believe him, for each of these three ingredients was equally essential to the creation of the Nintendo 64's comedy swansong.

Live & Reloaded

■ *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was revisited in 2005 with the Xbox remake *Live & Reloaded*, which copied the original's single-player game near precisely but revamped the multiplayer to include new weapons and gameplay mechanics. Being a remake, most of the effort in development was placed on technical aspects. As Beanland notes, "I had a lot more memory to play with, so I used the original, uncompressed high-definition recordings of the dialogue and sound effects, remixed every note of the score and added as much live performance as I could. We even managed to get a 5.1 mix of 'Sloprano' (The Great Mighty Poo's theme tune) and guest appearances from American musicians Nile Rodgers and Dweezil Zappa.' From a design perspective, *Live & Reloaded* was successful. As Ridgeway states, "The comedy was still very obvious in *Live & Reloaded* and the game once again pushed boundaries in terms of graphics." Ironically enough, it was the same misfortune that reduced the original to commercial mediocrity that went on to mar its successor. Where *Bad Fur Day* was released at the end of the N64's lifespan, *Live & Reloaded* was released at the end of the Xbox's short shelf life. Nonetheless, the limited sales caused by this once again would not dishearten the development team. "It would have been great to see millions of sales," says Marlow, "but the feedback we get from fans and the pride we feel for the product makes it worthwhile. I hope it will always be fondly remembered."





Passion was the first ingredient added to the sterile *Twelve Tales* mix. What other fuel could cause a designer to ditch what was a near-certain commercial success in favour of a game centered around comedy – a genre that, of all game types, has proven the least commercially viable? For a designer with the reputation of Seavor, however, passion was never in question. The same cannot be said for the second ingredient – trust – which in game design, as in all other forms of business, can never be taken for granted.

■■■ THE SCRUTINY of censorship and the tightrope on which publishers anchor their public images are well known. Very rarely are developers able to create games without constraint because their games ultimately represent not just each developer in and of itself, but the publisher and platform too. No publisher-developer relationship illustrates this point better than that of Nintendo and Rare at the time of the Nintendo 64. After all, it is only due to the two companies' combined work that the N64 is now considered the console on which many of the greatest games of all time were released. Needless to say, Rare's work spoke much of Nintendo itself. One could hardly blame Nintendo for being watchful of its second-party developer's produce. Thankfully, however, the two great companies shared a common trait - a genuine passion for games. Due to this passion – and the trust that Rare had earned through years of quality production – Nintendo gave to Seavor and his team that most valuable commodity: freedom. As Marlow happily recounts, "We were given an unheard of amount of free reign by Nintendo. Very few scenes got cut."



CHRIS MARLOW
Programmer

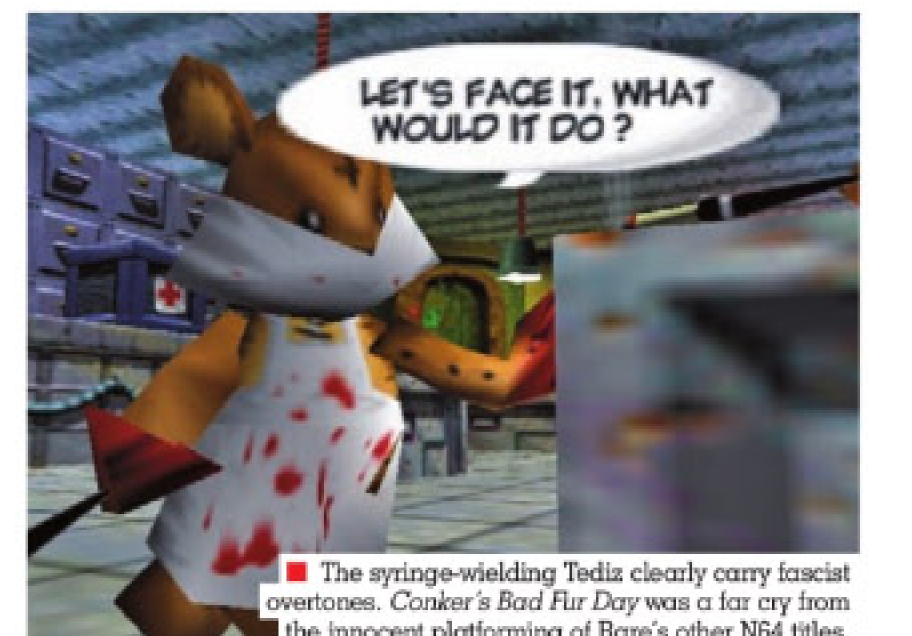
Passion and trust are essential to game development for one simple reason: a designer must have passion to form a valuable vision, and must be given the trust to craft that vision as he/she sees fit. This is the path that opened to the truly remarkable and rare quality integral to all great works of art, of which *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is an all too rare example: an intimacy between creator and audience. Every element of the game is imbued with the personality of its creator. "Chris Seavor is a bit of an evil genius," says Ridgeway. "The gameplay, the design and the dark humour came from deep within the depths of his brain. I wouldn't go poking around in there, I can't guarantee you'd come out alive… or mentally stable."

Freedom in hand, Seavor went on to pour every ounce of his imagination into the game. As Beanland notes, "The initial idea for the characters and scenarios always came from Chris. When we worked together in Rare's main sound studio, Chris would give me a brief outline for each scene, I'd hit record and we'd start batting ideas back and forth, trying to come up with stuff that made us laugh."

One should note here the startlingly unique and natural means through which content was created. Unlike the voice production process of most games, in which an actor is brought in once a script has been finalised, given very little information to sculpt their character from and very little time in which to do it, Seavor and his team worked hand-in-hand, taking however much time was needed to discover not only quality but, more importantly, personality. 'It was a really good way to work," says Beanland. "None of the dialogue was scripted, it was all very immediate and off-the-cuff and I think that comes through in the final edit." As Seavor remarks, "A lot of voice acting in games comes across as wooden for two reasons: bad writing and recording sessions where the voice actor has no context for, or interest in what he's saying. A lot of the best lines in *Conker* came completely out of the blue."

While the general consensus might be that without the use of professional actors a game limits its potential to render fully realised characters, the *Conker's Bad Fur Day* team would respectfully disagree. "The majority of the voice acting was performed by Chris Seavor," says Beanland. "Chris managed to pull lots of different voices out of the CONTINUED >.





■ The syringe-wielding Tediz clearly carry fascist overtones. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was a far cry from the innocent platforming of Rare's other N64 titles.



The Big N Versus The Big M

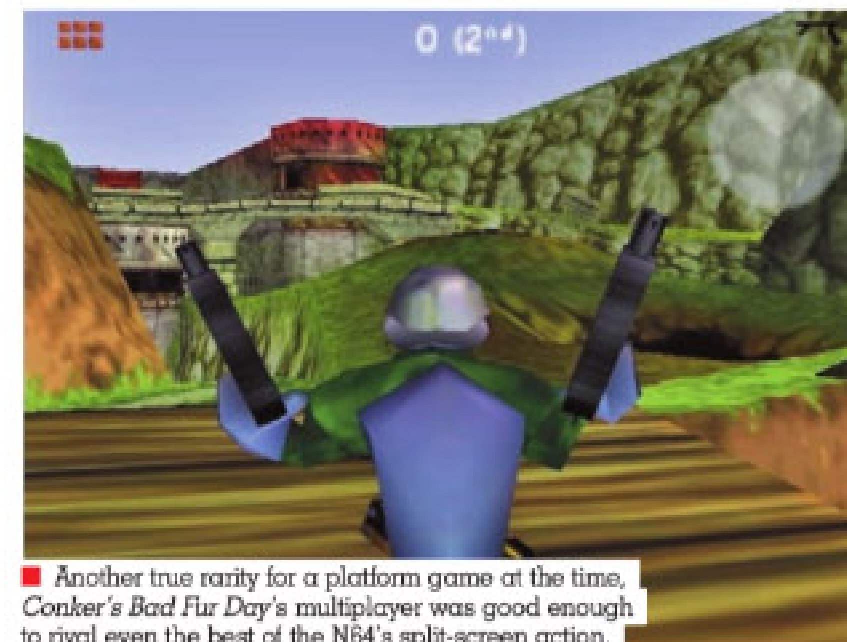
Conker fills a very special gap in gaming, not simply because it is such a unique title, but because as little as four years separated it from releases on Nintendo and Microsoft platforms. As such, it does much to highlight the differences between the two gaming giants. "Microsoft is definitely different to work with. It's more organised regarding deadlines, schedules and budget - which is fair enough when you're running a business."

Seavor's words here will come as little surprise. What may surprise, however, is Ridgeway's claim that, "There were several closet *Conker* fans at Microsoft. Lots of people got excited about the game. That's always great for the team making it." While it's easy to envision Microsoft placing many restraints and demands on developers, the *Live & Reloaded* team argue the contrary. "There is a lot of organisation behind the scenes on account of Microsoft being such a massive company," says Ridgway, "but while some may believe Microsoft doesn't give enough freedom for creativity, the truth is that we actually needed that structure to ensure the game came out on time and to such a high standard." Seavor adds, "Microsoft did give us quite a large amount of freedom to do what we wanted. Not many developers have an opportunity to go back to an old project and totally revamp it."



bag, which I would then take and process in different ways to help differentiate them a bit more." The acting produced by Seavor , Marlow (the legendary Great Mighty Poo), Ridgeway (the sunflower, the Juggas, Berri and Mrs Queen Bee) and Beanland, who cut it all together, easily rivals the standard output of most professional voice actors in games at the time — a point which says nothing of the quality of professional actors, but a great deal of the benefit of recording with people close to the development, who already know, understand and have a relationship to the characters they are voicing.

THE FREE-FLOWING creativity that Seavor put into the dialogue echoed throughout the development's entirety. As Ridgeway states, "Chris always had a vision of how he wanted everything to look and work. It was really useful for us as animators to have someone who really understood every aspect of the characters and was able to convey those personality traits to us." Herein lies the real lesson that *Conker's Bad Fur Day* taught (or at least should have taught) the gaming industry. In truth, there is no underlying equation to explain why comedy cannot work in games. If that were so, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* would have failed. The crux of the matter is remarkably simple. First, as Seavor points out, "The designer's ideas are either funny or they're not," and second, those ideas can only become funny when the development team is given the freedom to pour its collective personality into the work. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was funny because Seavor himself is funny, and because he was able to express himself without restraint. The result? Undeniable proof that comedy in games doesn't just work, but can genuinely improve the overall gaming experience. "Sometimes the humour would actually drive the gameplay in positive ways," says Seavor. "A simple example of this is The Great Mighty Poo. The way that section was structured in terms of gameplay (throwing toilet rolls, the sweetcorn characters, the giant arm coming out of the poo) derived directly from the premise of the level, which was ultimately a humorous one: a gigantic poo can't sing very well without teeth, and the only thing that doesn't degrade in his mouth is sweetcorn." *Conker's Bad Fur Day* had proven right Seavor's belief in 'passion, trust and talent.' And its behind-the-scenes story would almost appear far-fetched if one of those core ingredients were to be removed in the final act, which is, of course, exactly what happened. This final, potentially disastrous hurdle zoomed into view in August 2001 when Nintendo of Europe refused to publish the game - despite Nintendo of America having already done so - giving the official line that "European localisation was not commercially viable."



Another true rarity for a platform game at the time, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*'s multiplayer was good enough to rival even the best of the N64's split-screen action.



It'd be hard to blame poor lil' Conker for temporarily forgetting about Berri and becoming smitten with the giant, and brilliantly well-rounded Jugga.

WHETHER THIS was the true reason for Nintendo of Europe dropping the title – or whether it was instead the much more obvious reason of the mature themes, violence, bad language and toilet humour – we shall never know. Seavor himself shrugs his shoulders saying, "It was published by THQ in Europe. I've no idea why," suggesting that if there was an ulterior reason for the publisher switch then it didn't filter down from Rare's upper management. Either way, gamers in Europe were quite happy with THQ publishing the game, as was THQ itself, which at the time remarked, "*Bad Fur Day* has to be one of the best games ever created."

In hindsight, it's difficult to say whether or not Nintendo of Europe made the right decision in not publishing the game, for as Marlow states, "Commercially the game did okay [it sold 0.77 million units worldwide], but less well than we felt it deserved, largely because the N64 was at the end of its life and all talk was of the next generation of consoles. Rentals, which we didn't profit from, were enormous. People chose to rent it rather than buy it as the single-player was short and the multiplayer was fun and easy to dip in to." Of course, for a game in which the entire development ethos was as a labour of love, commercially was not the one and only measure of success. "It's always nice to sell loads of copies," says Seavor, "but that's not the only reason to create a game. Games are a cultural and artistic phenomenon." His team would agree. "*Bad Fur Day* is the work I am most proud of and was easily one of the best achievements of my career," says Ridgeway.

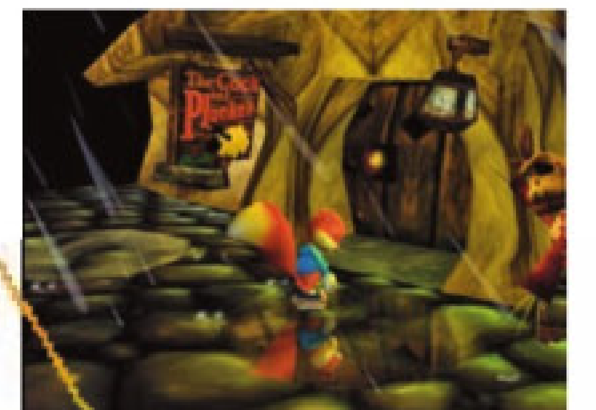




Conker's sense of humour stretched into parody, not just of videogame conventions but of familiar Hollywood staples too.

> **PEOPLE CHOSE TO RENT IT RATHER THAN BUY IT AS THE SINGLE-PLAYER WAS SHORT**



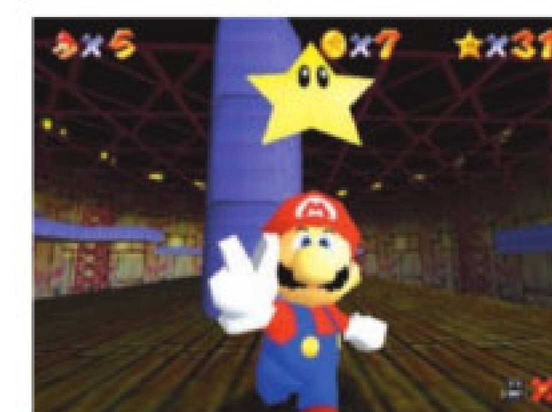


Meanwhile, Marlow reasons, "We could not have made a better game at the time. It pushed the N64 to its limits, looking as good as many of the early next generation titles that followed it. We received a lot of great reviews and the gamers who played it seemed to enjoy it."

The vision of the N64's most controversial title had been born with Seavor, and it was his direction and continual love and ambition that drove it to become more than just another generic 3D platform game. In sharing with the gaming world his unique, unbridled imagination, he gave the Nintendo 64 one of its greatest games, and it's pleasing to hear the man himself say, "While other games go on to make tons of money for the same amount of work, in hindsight, for *Conker* and the people I worked with on it, I wouldn't change a thing."



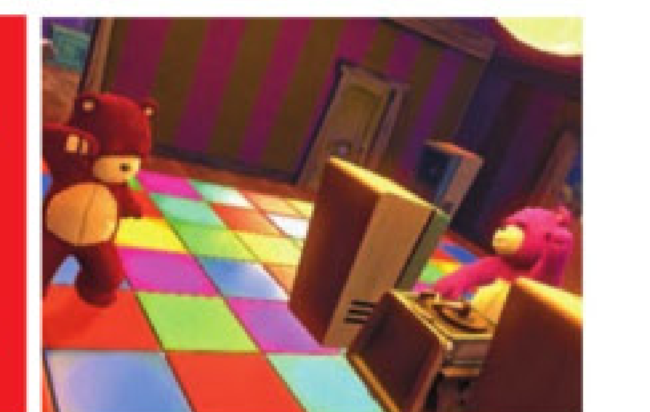
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



The initial design of *Twelve Tales* owed much to *Mario 64*, as did the eventual platform/collect gameplay of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*.



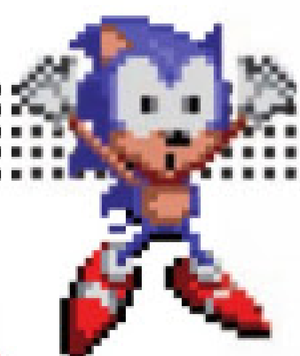
Few games have matched the spirit of *Bad Fur Day*, but the upcoming *Naughty Bear* seems to be giving it a good old try…



BEST BOSS

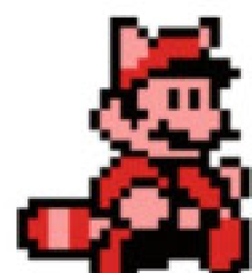
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA NES [Nintendo] 1986

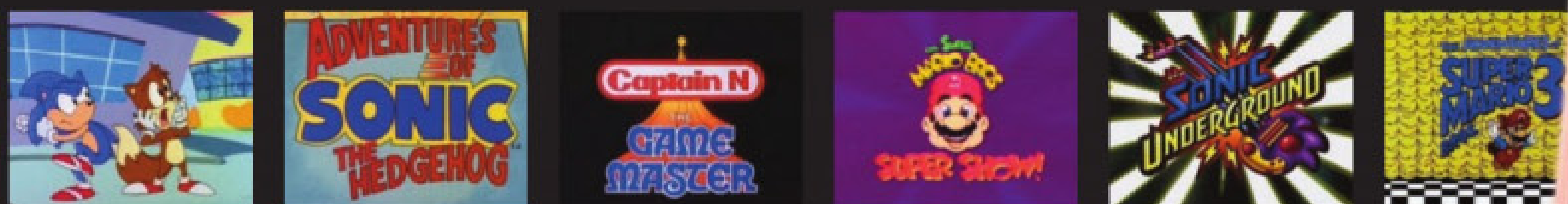
■ One of the greatest things about playing Nintendo games, and *Zelda* in particular, is the 'what if?' syndrome. That feeling of wondering what will happen if you do something unusual, and realising that Nintendo anticipated your experiment, providing a cool reaction. Several examples are present throughout the first *Zelda* – setting fire to a bush, for example – but the best is probably in the second boss, Dodongo. Though the giant lizard can be killed by throwing bombs at his belly, it's actually more effective and fun to drop a bomb in his path, causing him to eat and swallow the explosive, blowing his guts up from the inside out.



FROM PIXELS TO PRIMETIME

The plumber or the hedgehog? It's a question that has split videogame aficionados for nearly two decades. But in the Nineties a selection of Sega and Nintendo branded cartoons added more fuel to the fanboy fire. **games™** talks to Robby London about animation history…





SINCE ITS INCEPTION, the videogames industry has been characterised by an intrinsic flexibility; both in its evolution alongside technology and how it continues to offer more experiences for a wider variety of audiences. Yet while the Wii and Kinect clearly demonstrate how videogames are broadening their appeal, they only represent the latest trends in a progressive industry that has been diversifying its creative output for many years. Indeed, some of gaming's most coveted titles have a rich history, which transcends into media like film and television – and the most lucrative example yet had its humble debut in the mid-Nineties.

In 1996, a monochrome adventure about collecting cutesy monsters surfaced in Japan as a quirky RPG, before rapidly escalating into a worldwide phenomenon. Once the Nintendo merchandising mill got rolling, we were inundated with everything from *Pokémon*-endorsed lunchboxes and Pikachu plush dolls to an extensive range of trading cards that are still in production today. Yet out of all the pocket paraphernalia it's the *Pokémon* anime that stands as the most substantial offshoot – having been in continual production since 1997 and currently nearing its 700th episode. That's more episodes than there are species of *Pokémon*.

But while the list of videogame-to-anime adaptations makes for an interesting read, the West has an equally curious heritage of animated tie-ins that date back to the Hanna-Barbera-produced *Pac-Man* cartoon from 1982. This animation took the premise of Namco's classic arcade game, transforming it into a family-themed narrative where Pac-Man and his friends battled with the devious ghosts in Pac-Land. It only ran for two seasons, but proved that cartoons based on videogames had mass market potential even before the dawn of the NES. However, it would be seven years before the concept would achieve its own era of prosperity.

Making its debut in 1989 as part of the Monday-to-Friday line-up, *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show* was a popular children's TV series broadcast in the US. Each episode was introduced by a live-action sitcom titled 'Mario Brothers Plumbing' – which starred ex-wrestler Lou Albano and Danny Wells as Nintendo's famous red and green duo. Both actors would then engage in various slapstick shenanigans with a guest celebrity, before transitioning to a cartoon where an animated Mario and Luigi had their own adventures in the Mushroom Kingdom. The show was produced by veteran animation house DIC Entertainment, which was also responsible for *Ulysses 31*, *Inspector Gadget* and *The Real Ghostbusters*.

> **IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I EVER HEARD THE PHRASE 'YOU CAN GO WITH GOD'**

"The tenor of the times in television animation was to favour cartoons based on anything that was perceived as already hot with kids," recalls former Head of Creative Affairs at DIC, Robby London, who at this stage in his career had already worked for Filmation and penned the pilot script for *He-Man And The Masters of the Universe*. "A new show was far more likely to be sampled by a young audience if it was based on something they already knew and liked, rather than an original concept of which they'd never heard. So everyone was trying to acquire the animation rights to successful characters and properties. With something as hot as the Nintendo titles were at the time, many animation studios lobbied actively to get the rights. It was an extremely competitive environment, and Andy Heyward **CONTINUED >.**


"The most popular games these days seem to be way too violent to be remotely considered for the restrictive environment of children's television," says London.

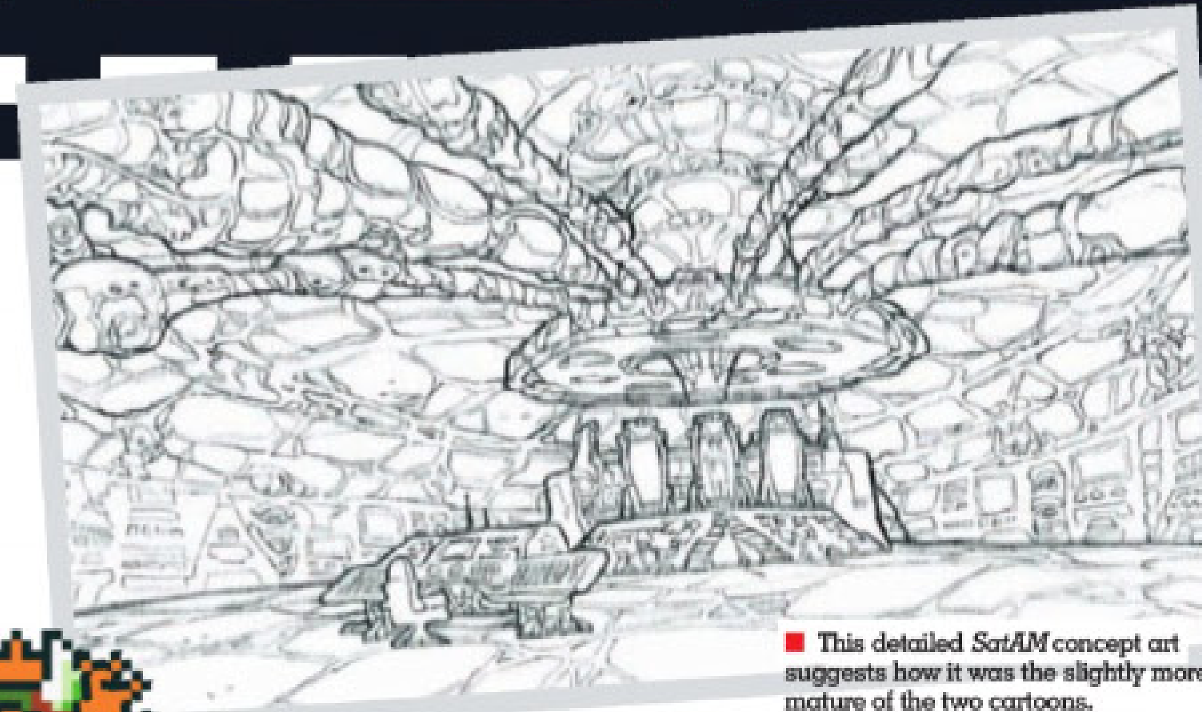
[former DIC chairman and CEO] had an unerring knack for identifying these properties and convincing rights holders to go with DIC. In the case of Nintendo, *we* definitely approached *them*, as I'm certain did most other Hollywood animation studios. They went with us."

***SUPER SHOW* WOULD** span 65 episodes, many of which featured the familiar Nintendo cast in movie parodies like On Her Majesty's Sewer Service and Hooded Robin And His Mario Men. Robby described how the open-endedness of the Nintendo source material allowed for a greater sense of creative freedom. "Most people I knew didn't like working in the then-current environment, which discouraged the creation of original shows in favour of simply adapting existing properties to animation. I certainly shared that perspective. Having said that, I think the shows based on videogames were probably among our favourite categories to adapt. For one, the videogames themselves were colourful, imaginative, hip and more than a little bizarre – in the best sense. The other thing is that videogames of the era were so undeveloped in terms of characters, storyline, and depth of lore, that it left a lot of room for us to come up with our own creative material, as compared to say, adapting something like a book or a movie which had so much narrative and character development already laid out for us."

Not only did DIC Entertainment secure the rights to produce *Mario* cartoons, but after further talks with Nintendo of America, they were also given the green light to use other Nintendo franchises as a basis for something more unique. "Sometime after we started working on *Mario*, other Nintendo titles were getting hotter and hotter," recounts a reflective London. "We had a good relationship with Nintendo and we were trying to capitalize on some of their other titles, which were growing in popularity. DIC then came up with *Captain N: The Game Master* as a means to incorporate several of the other Nintendo stars into one series."

This original series focused on a teenager named Kevin who gets sucked into a universe called Videoland while playing his NES. Kevin then discovers he's part of an ancient prophecy to save Videoland from the forces of evil, and although initially reluctant, he soon becomes the titular Captain N, with his trademark Power Pad belt-buckle and NES Zapper. Each episode then took place in a videogame-inspired world like *Castlevania* or *Metroid*, as Kevin teamed up with Princess Lana, Mega Man, Simon Belmont and Pit, to defend Videoland from the likes of King Hippo. The cartoon was also known for taking several liberties with its source material – which included turning Mother Brain into a garish face composed of excessive eye shadow and lipstick – but by spanning many classic NES games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, it's an interesting curio nonetheless.

Captain N launched simultaneously with *Super Show* in 1989, but rather than a weekday fixture, it instead became part of NBC's Saturday morning line-up until 1991. The series lasted for 34 episodes, with the first two seasons having noticeably high production values. However, after NBC made budget cuts before the third and final season, each episode's runtime was cut to just 11 minutes, with a substantial drop in overall quality. Then, after *Super Show* departed at the end of 1989, Captain N was partnered with *The Adventures Of Super Mario Bros. 3* in 1990 and *Super Mario World* in 1991 – also produced by DIC. Both cartoons were less successful than *Super Show* and only lasted 13 episodes each, but by having classic *Mario* games as their inspiration, each mini-series has its own unique charm that endears it to kids even today.

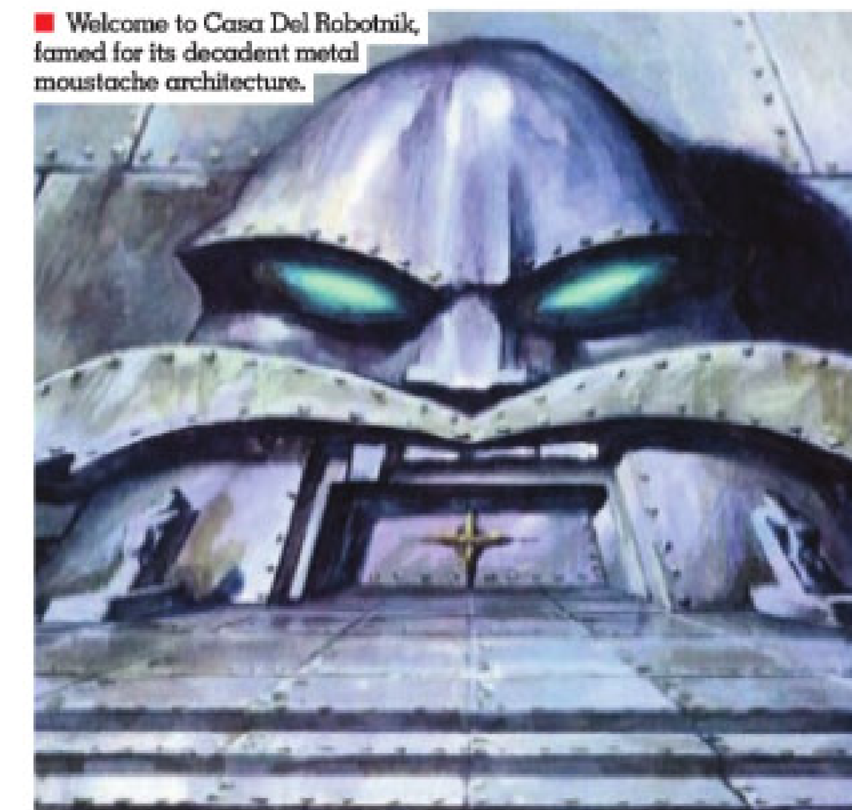

This detailed *SatAM* concept art suggests how it was the slightly more mature of the two cartoons.




The two different *Sonic* cartoons presented very different visions of the planet Mobius.

AFTER WORKING WITH Nintendo for two years, DIC then went on a videogame hiatus, instead putting its efforts into cartoons like *Captain Planet And The Planeteers*. "Honestly, it's a bit of a blur," reminisces London. "We were producing over 200 half-hours of animation a year back then, which spanned several series and all the networks. While my memories of the Nintendo-based shows are fond ones, I don't have any unique emotional connection with those series in particular." Indeed, it wasn't until 1993 that London had his first encounter with a blue hedgehog, for which DIC is better known.

"It was the same initial process as with Nintendo," recalls a nostalgic London on how DIC first got involved with Sega. "*Sonic The Hedgehog* had become huge and we thought we could sell it to one of the networks, so we approached Sega and made a deal with them. A network was always the preferred 'prestige' placement because of better ratings and higher fees. So when ABC bought *Sonic* from us, we were elated. We then tried to convince them that it would be to their advantage to allow us to sell other episodes of *Sonic* into syndication at the same time. This would effectively make it into a huge six-day-a-week phenomenon. But ABC wasn't having any of it, and basically told us that if we planned to syndicate it simultaneously, our deal with them was off. It was the first time I ever heard the phrase 'you can go with God'."


Welcome to Casa Del Robotnik, famed for its decadent metal moustache architecture.

ABC didn't like the idea of not being the exclusive purveyor of *Sonic* by having it running on their network at weekends and in first-run syndication during weekdays. It would've been a substantial business risk. Fortunately, London came up with an ingenious solution. "I came up with the idea of producing two very different *Sonic* series; the one that the network wanted, which was darker and more serious, and one that was totally different in tone and style, i.e. goofy, cartoony and gag-driven – which we would syndicate during the week. To our delight, ABC agreed to this. So we were able to launch both a network series and a syndicated series based on the same character simultaneously – a television first. And that is the sole explanation for why there are two series which are so different."

I CAME UP WITH THE IDEA OF PRODUCING TWO VERY DIFFERENT SONIC SERIES

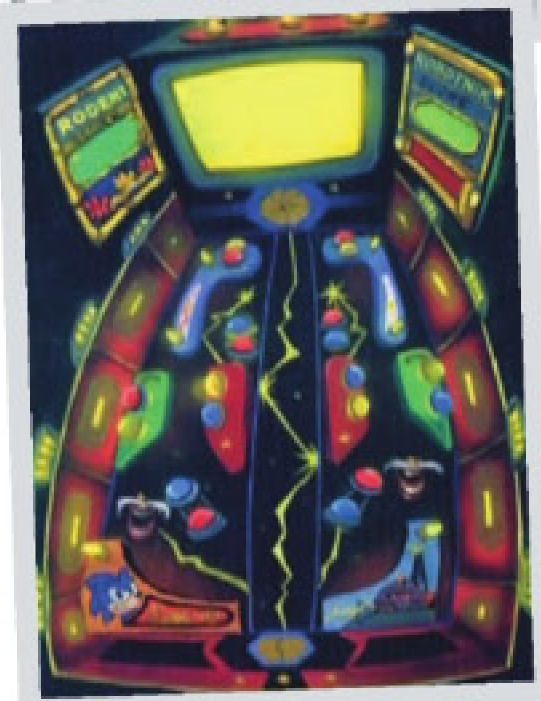
Adventures Of Sonic The Hedgehog and *Sonic The Hedgehog: The Animated Series* (often referred to as *Sonic SatAM* by fans due to its Saturday morning timeslot) both launched in September 1993. *Adventures* had more of a *Road Runner* dynamic, with Robotnik's pair of dim-witted henchmen – the chicken-like Scratch and the tunnelling Grounder – constantly setting up ACME-style traps to capture Sonic and Tails, but with suitably slapstick and over-the-top consequences. CONTINUED >.

A Fink in the Past

WHILE THE *SUPER Mario Bros. Super Show* was accompanied by a *Mario* cartoon from Monday to Thursday, the Friday showing was reserved for *The Legend Of Zelda*. This animation was loosely based on the first two NES games and focused on the trials of Link and Zelda as they fought Ganon. The series had both sides vying for the Triforce of Power and Wisdom – with the Triforce of Courage surprisingly absent – and was laden with many familiar sound bites as well as Moblins and Octoroks. "I did like the *Moonlighting* component of *The Legend Of Zelda*," muses London, "which was loosely inspired by the relationship between Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd in the hit primetime series of the era." Indeed, this roguish portrayal of Link was the most vocal in Hyrule history, as he tried, and failed, to get Zelda to kiss him in every episode. But the cartoon's most heinous crime was Link's appalling catchphrase of, "Well, excuuuuuuse me, Princess!" which he managed to spout 29 times in just 13 episodes.







Sonic SatAM arrived the same year as Sonic Spinball. Clearly, the word 'rodent' here suggests it's Robotnik's table.

It was very child-friendly, with Robotnik being portrayed as a dastardly villain trying to take over the planet Mobius. Sonic also kept his cool videogame persona, and was partial to the odd chilli dog. The series would last for 65 episodes, and was broadcast in the UK the same year, courtesy of Channel 4.

Sonic SatAM, in comparison, had a more mature and oppressive premise. The planet in question was still Mobius, but the zany imagery of *Adventures* was replaced with a robotic dystopia where the sinister Dr. Julian Ivo Robotnik had enslaved the once peaceful inhabitants of Mobotropolis with his army of SWAT Bot soldiers. Sonic then joined up with the Freedom Fighters – a ragtag assortment of anthropomorphised characters including squirrel leader Sally Acorn and a rabbit cyborg named Bunnie Rabbot – as they battled Robotnik's conquest to take over the planet. The series lasted for just 26 episodes with season two ending on a cliff-hanger as Sonic and Sally destroyed Robotnik's doomsday device, only for Snively – Robotnik's nephew – to then emerge as the new villain. There were even plans for a third season, but these were scrapped after the series was abruptly cancelled, much to the disappointment of the *Sonic SatAM* fanbase.

But despite the premature cancellation of *Sonic SatAM* – which was a victim of a rapidly changing industry – the working relationship between DIC and the videogame publishers remained strong. "They gave us guidelines up front, exercised their approval rights and reviewed and commented on all the materials," Robby recalled when asked about how involved Sega and Nintendo were in the production process. "My recollection is that Nintendo was reasonable, professional and good to deal with. Their America office seemed quite capable of speaking definitively on behalf of their Japanese owners, and I don't remember any problematic disputes with Nintendo, which was not always the case with Sega of America."

NINTENDO WAS REASONABLE, PROFESSIONAL AND GOOD TO DEAL WITH

IT SEEMS THE difference between Nintendo and Sega was a bit of paradox, as London described how working with Sega had its ups and downs. "On the one hand, the person that Sega assigned to be our contact spent more time at the studio and was more hands-on. Typically this could be a nightmare, but in this case the person was fantastic. Her name was Jane Thompson, and any fans of our several *Sonic* series have Jane to thank for being so terrific and professional to work with. But on the other hand, the senior management at Sega at the time could be arbitrary, capricious and frustrating, and I remember there were a few big and not-so-pleasant battles."

London then recalled a cultural clash, where digits were lopped off before being hastily sewn back on. "One of the more interesting conflicts involved the fact that, as a standard animation practice to save 'pencil mileage', we had given Sonic only three fingers and a thumb. This is done regularly with animated characters, and Sega of America's upper management approved our design of Sonic with this. However, several months later, someone back in Japan complained, because apparently the Yakuza has a habit of chopping off fingers, or something. I may not have it exactly right, but it was something like that. In any case, the three fingers was a big problem for Sega of Japan, which was ultimately the controlling entity. It was a huge deal for us to go back and re-animate all the footage that had already been completed, because doing so would jeopardize our ability to honour our contractual airdates. But Sega was absolutely insistent that we add a fourth finger, and, as I liked to joke later, we ultimately capitulated and 'gave them the finger'."

BUT DESPITE A few early misunderstandings, DIC Entertainment and Sega of America would once again collaborate nearly five years later. "I was happy to do it," recounts London when asked about the last Sonic animation DIC would produce. "We had worked out our kinks with Sega and knew what we were dealing with. I enjoyed working with Jane Thompson and we knew the Sonic character. The release of the Dreamcast was part of what motivated the production of the new series and the concept came from DIC staff writer Phil Harnage."

Sonic Underground was first broadcast in 1999 on UPN and would continue for two seasons – totalling 40 episodes – before it was cancelled in 2000 with its storyline unresolved. It shared a lot of similarities with *Sonic SatAM* in terms of its Robotropolis setting, which was once again occupied by Robotnik and his legion of SWAT Bots. But instead of the Freedom Fighters, the plot now revolved around Sonic being part of a royal bloodline and the rightful heir to the Mobius throne – along with his siblings Sonia the Hedgehog and Manic the Hedgehog. They also possessed medallions which could morph into instruments so the trio could play together as the titular Sonic Underground rock band, and it's this musical theme which endears the series to London the most.



ROBBY LONDON
Ex-head of DIC

"I have a particularly fond memory of this series because I wrote the title song – and songwriting had been (and remains) my first passion," he says with a smile. "The way we chose title songs was to solicit spec submissions from various composers. So I secretly got our music supervisor to throw my demo into the pile, under a pseudonym, so nobody knew I had written it. Since I was normally part of the group that chose the song, I found a ruse to abstain from voting, and the others picked my song solely on its merits. I was thrilled. *Sonic Underground* also came out during the heyday of Napster. You could keep track of how many copies of a given song were being traded illegally, and while most songwriters were furious because they were being deprived of royalties, I was unbelievably thrilled as I watched the increasing number of people 'stealing' my song, because it meant they liked it!"

Nonetheless, the demanding production environment had also caused London some creative frustration. "The hardest thing was producing these shows on such ludicrously challenged schedules and budgets. Plus we were always producing several series simultaneously. It made it impossible for me to give any one series the attention I would have liked. The other extremely difficult thing was having two 'clients' – in the networks and rights-holders – who both had contractual approval rights. Believe me, it could sometimes feel like Hillary Clinton trying to reconcile differences between Israel and Palestine!"

But while this extreme juggling act between networks and IP owners wasn't for the faint hearted, it was clear that London wouldn't have changed his time at DIC for anything. "I was unbelievably fortunate to have an amazingly long run of continuous employment in a creative position. The privilege of making one's living by writing and producing cartoons is a pretty great thing." And with 257 episodes of videogame-inspired animation under his belt – many of which are still entertaining young children and gamers today – we couldn't agree more. Although **games™** feels compelled to say that *Pokémon* is still way ahead, both in terms of volume and fingers.

The Fastest Thing Alive

AS WELL as writing the title song for *Sonic Underground*, Robby also confessed to composing the intro ballad for *Sonic SatAM*. "I wrote the lyrics, including the phrase 'The fastest thing alive' myself. It was the title of an entire song – words and music – that I wrote and submitted. The backstory is that we had submitted several potential songs to ABC from our regular composers, but ABC kept rejecting them and our music supervisor was getting frustrated. I thought I had a handle on what they were looking for, so I thought, what the hell, I'd take a shot at it. We submitted my song to ABC and they really liked it. I initially believed they were going to use it as I wrote it, but in typical network fashion, they brought in one of their favoured composers to tweak it. So whoever it was [Michael Tavera] changed the music a little and ended up sharing a song-writing credit with me. But for posterity, I always considered it mostly my song."



The quality of animation wasn't the greatest strength of DIC's videogame cartoons; some of the character designs wouldn't look out of place on a bootleg T-shirt.

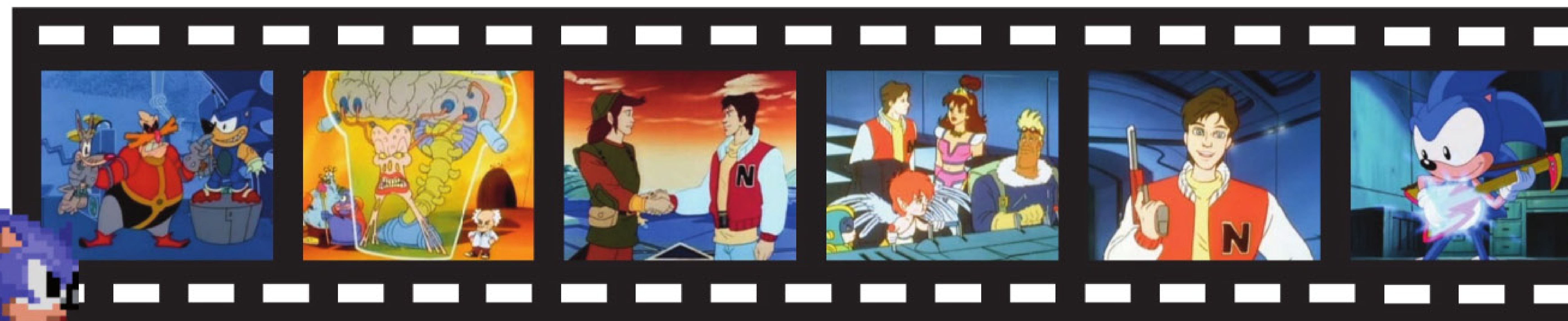
SAMUS IS MISSING!



WITH *CAPTAIN N* using Mother Brain as its main villain – as well as King Hippo, the Eggplant Wizard from *Punch-Out!!* and Kid Icarus as her bumbling henchmen – fans thought it strange that Samus Aran never appeared in the series. Story Editor Jeffery Scott clarified this discrepancy in an interview with a fansite with, "Never heard of her, that could be why." However, Miss Aran would get the coverage she deserved in the *Captain N* comic book series published by Valiant Comics in 1990 as part of the Nintendo Comics System. This Samus was cast as a more opportunistic bounty hunter who openly showed her affections towards Kevin.



Any similarities between this shot and LucasArts' *Day Of The Tentacle* are purely coincidental.



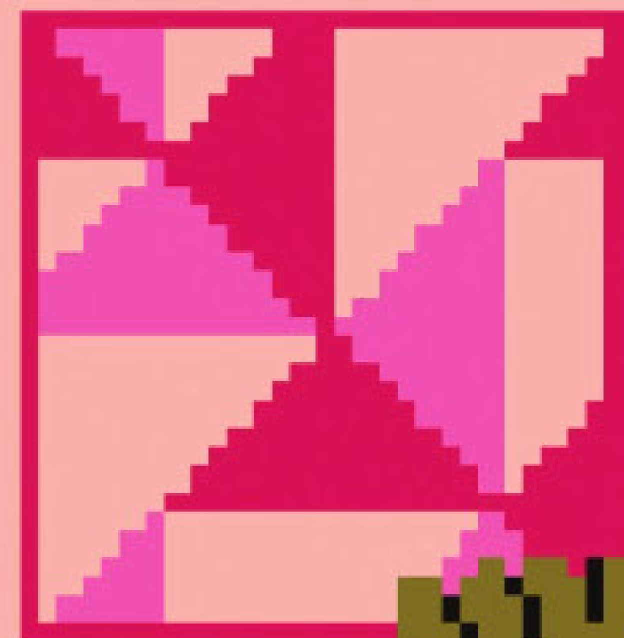
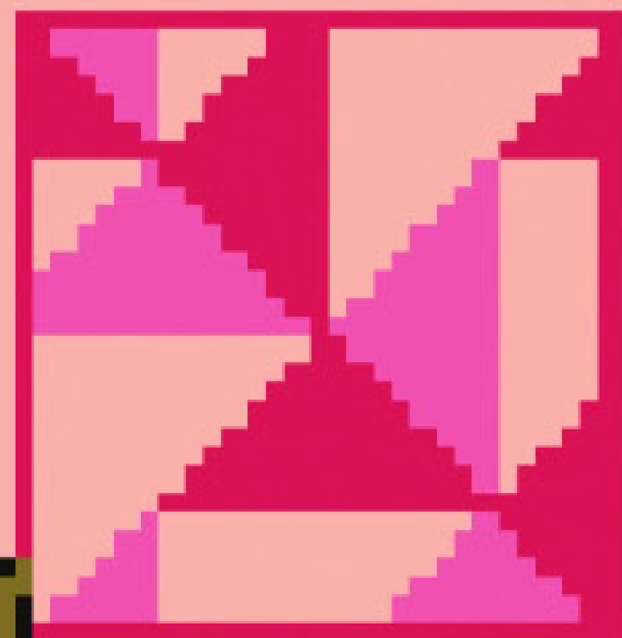


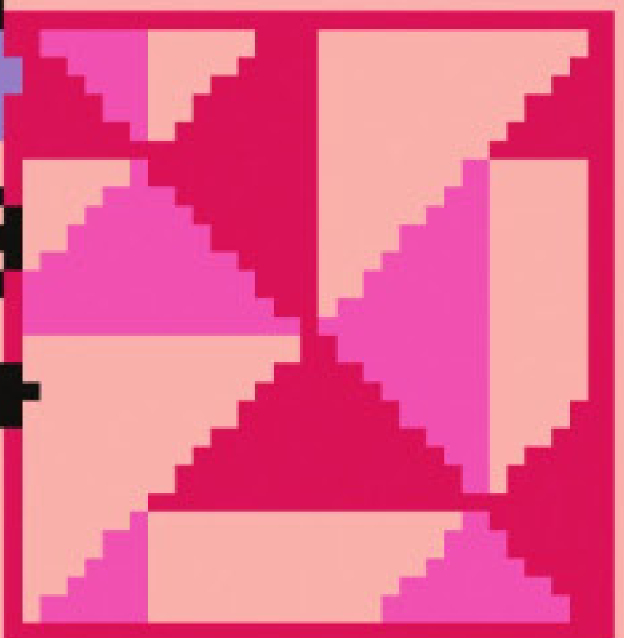
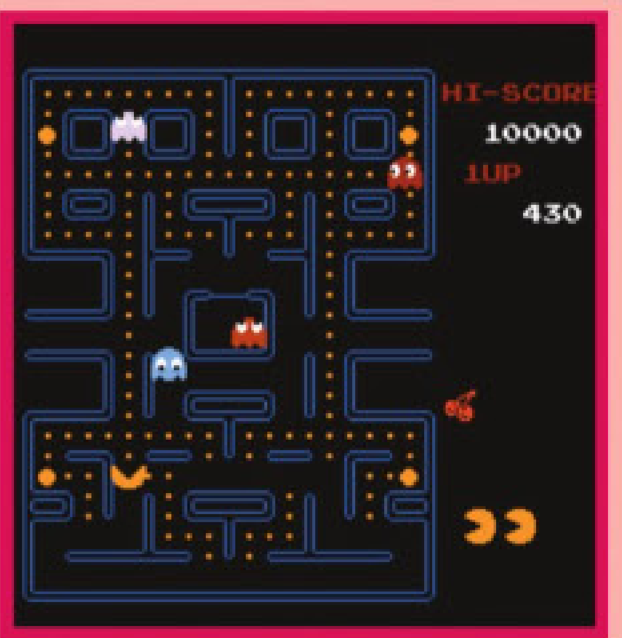
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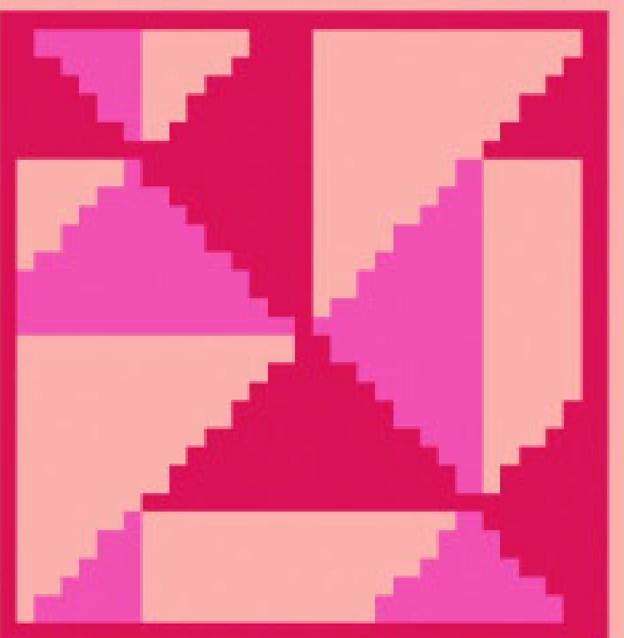
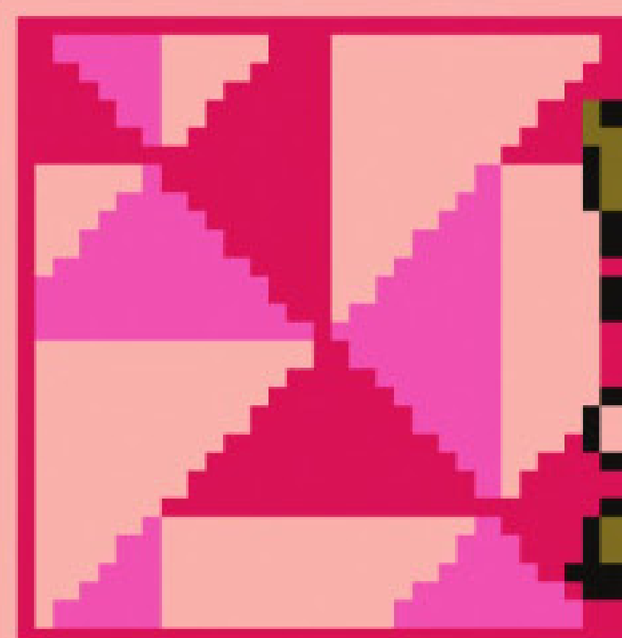
MORTAL KOMBAT ARCADE [Midway] **1992**

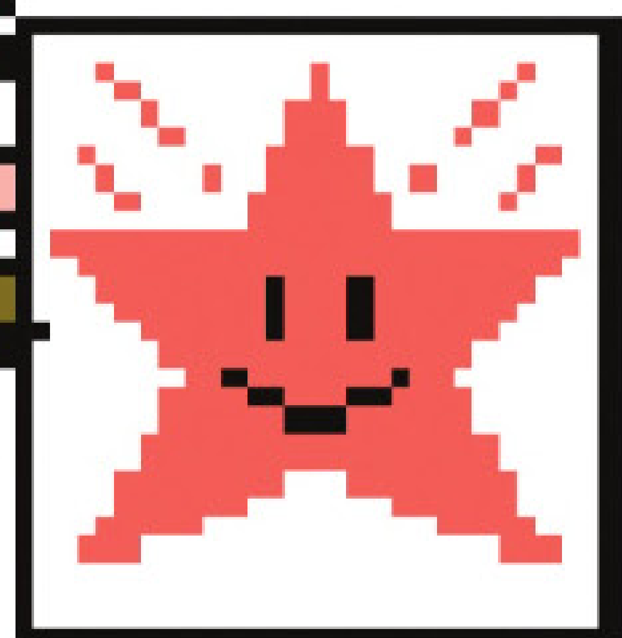
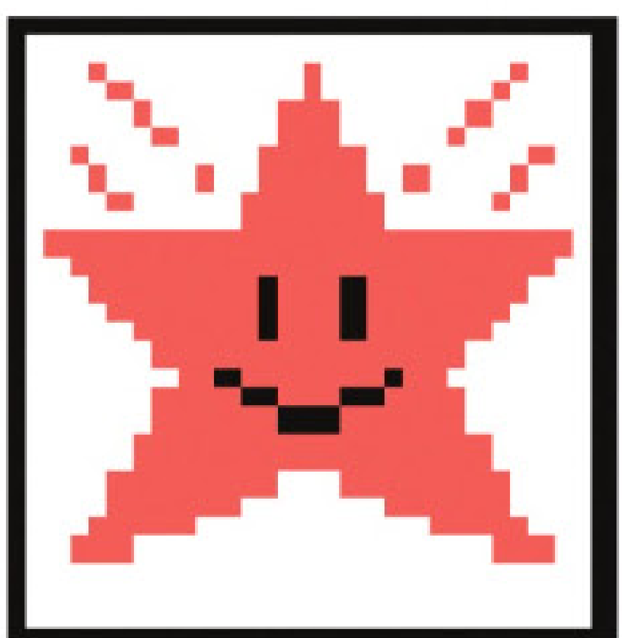
■ With its digitized characters and emphasis on all things gory, poor Goro couldn't have felt much more out of place as *Mortal Kombat*'s penultimate credit thief. A wonky-looking stop-motion creature with four arms, Goro is supposedly a 2,000-year old half-dragon, though he's probably better remembered as the wall that stood between you and the game's last boss, Shang Tsung. And what a wall he was. With an annoying grapple move that sees him grab you with two arms while using his spares to wail on you like a skin-covered bongo, an overpowered fireball and basic strikes capable of smashing entire health bars, we still can't beat him consistently. Cheap…



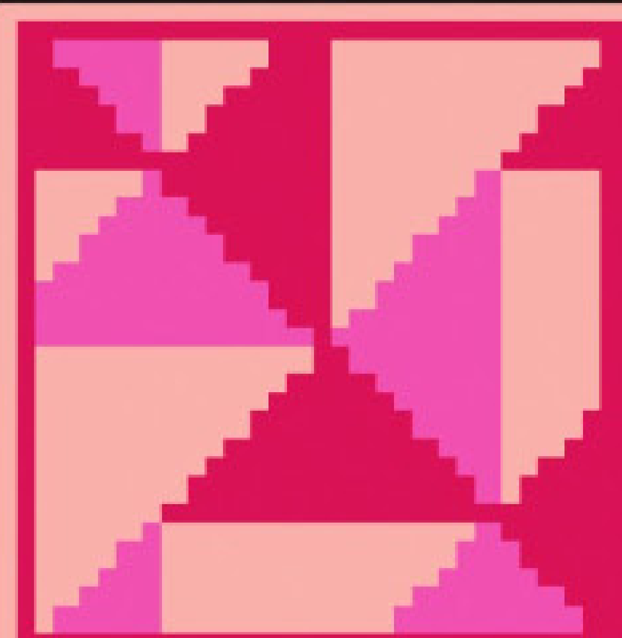
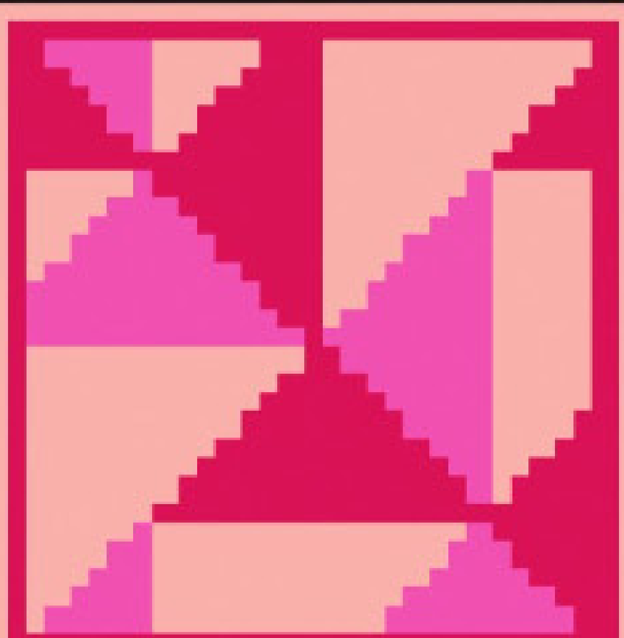



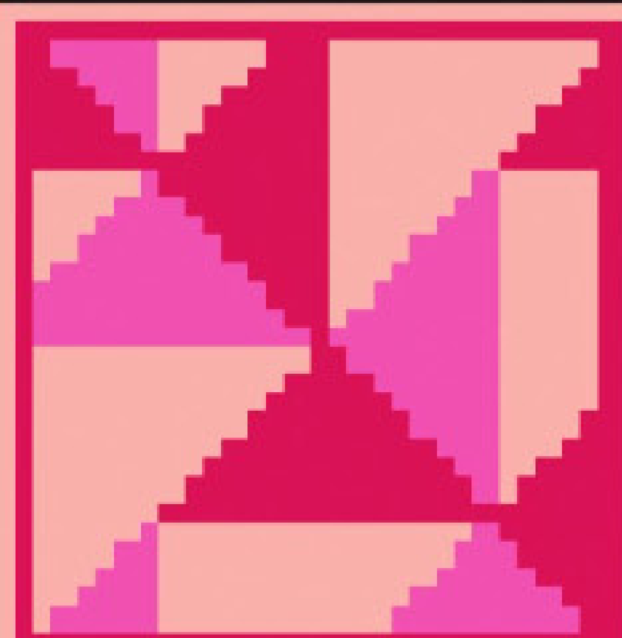
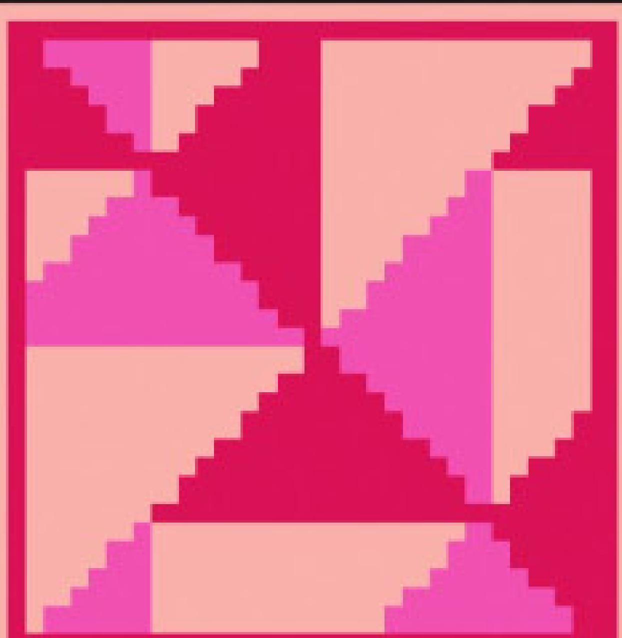
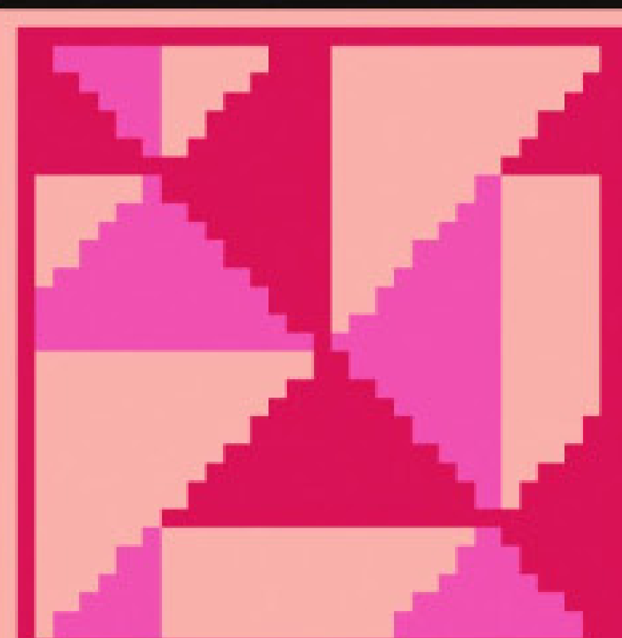
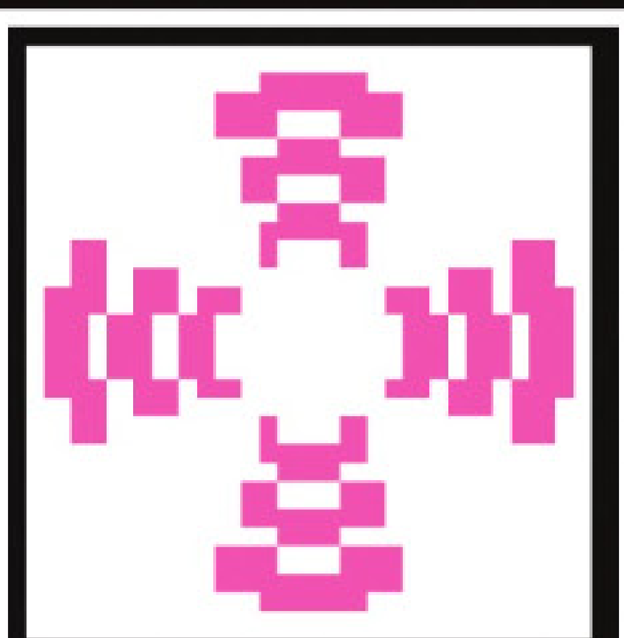
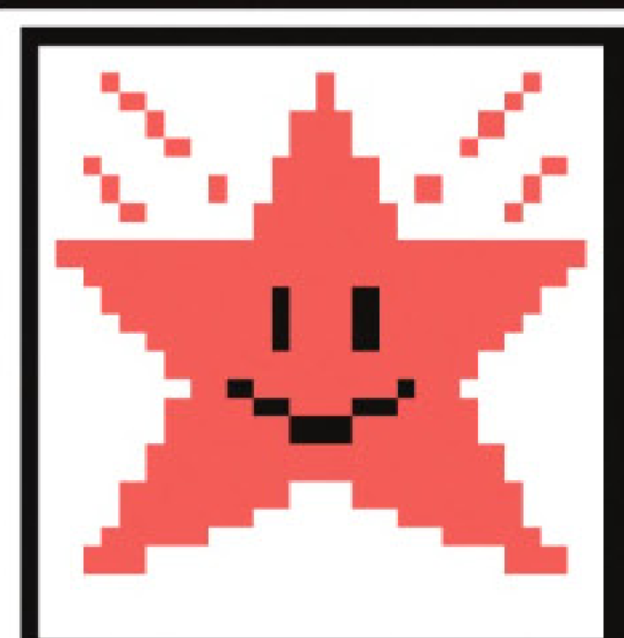
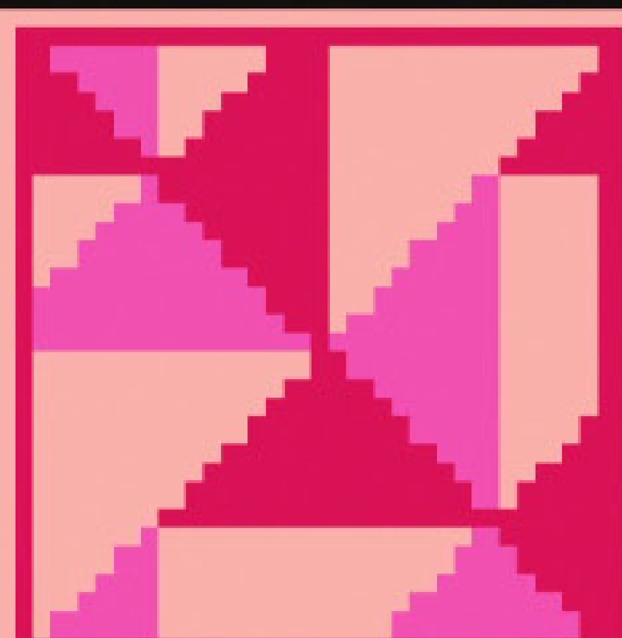
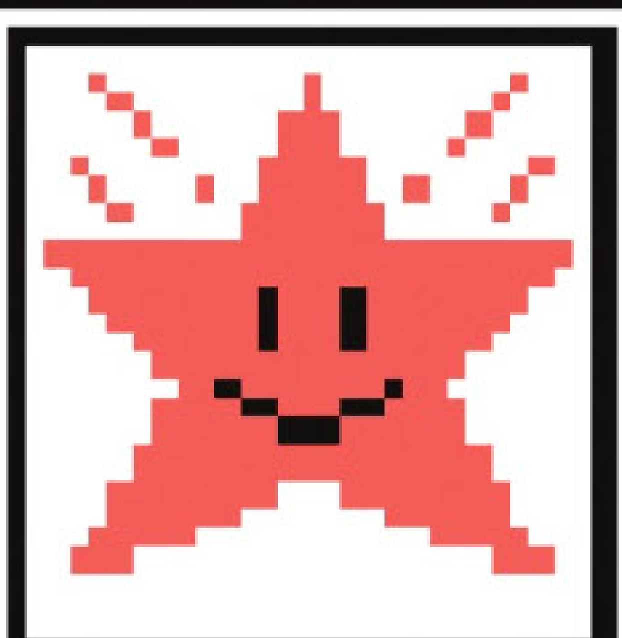



BIG IN JAPAN IN THE EIGHTIES

The Nintendo Famicom. You already know the story, right? It's the console that changed the world. But what was it like to actually be there at the time? We talk to some of Japan's best-known retro-gamers to find out

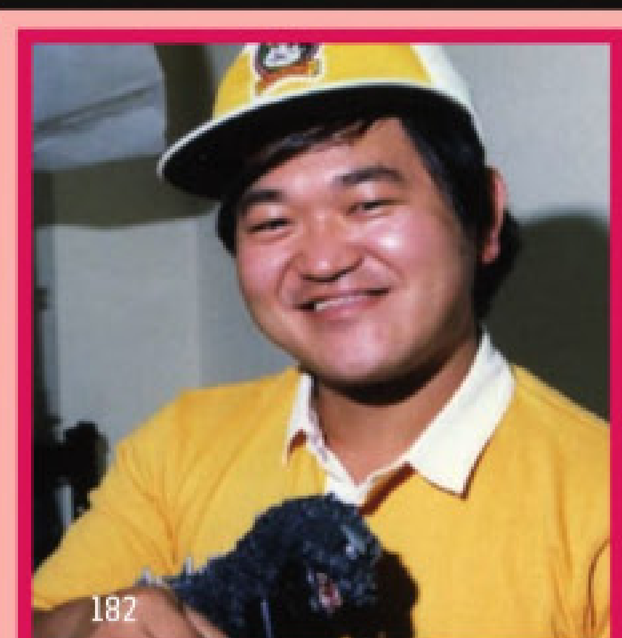
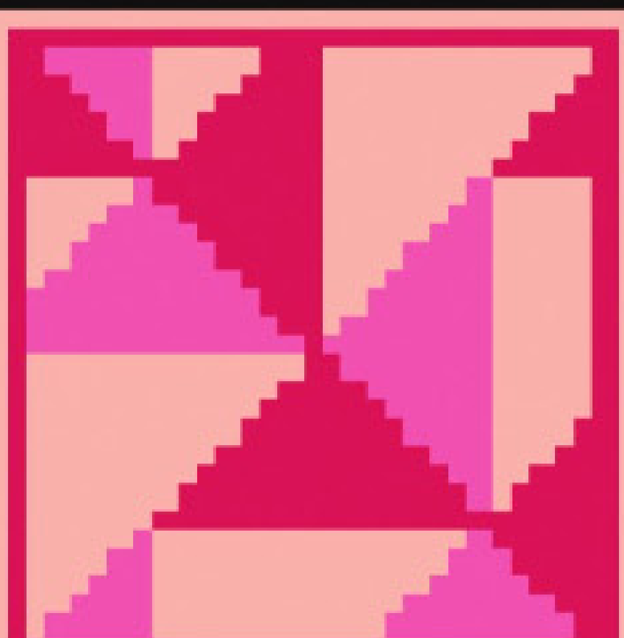
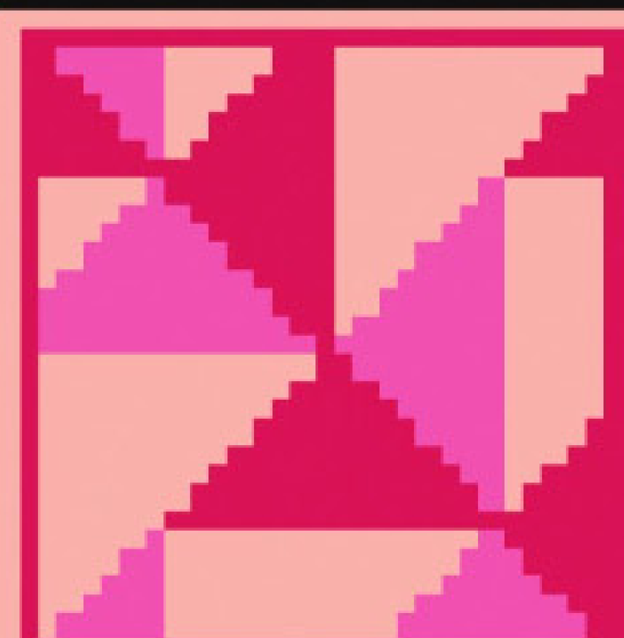
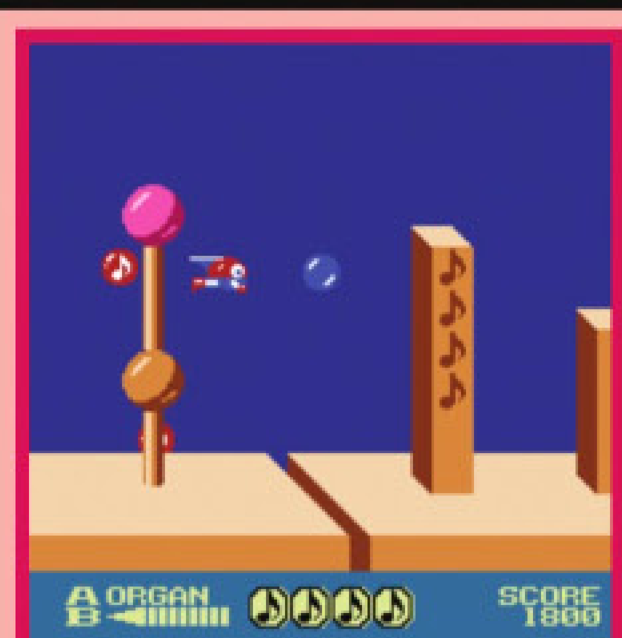



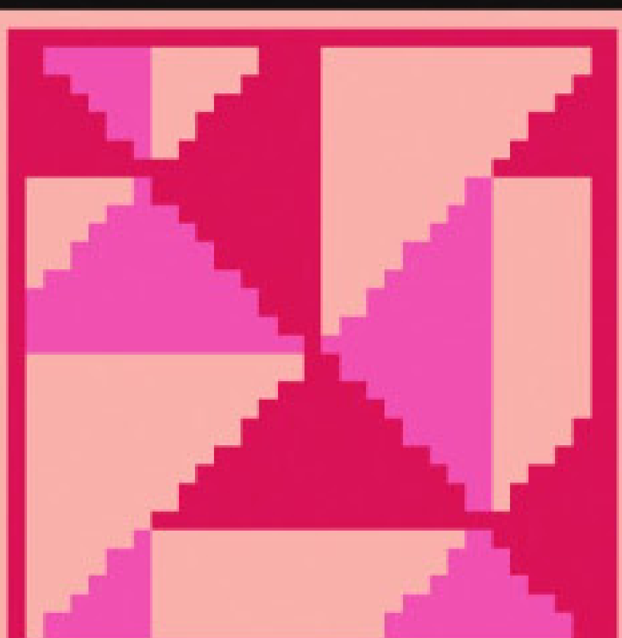








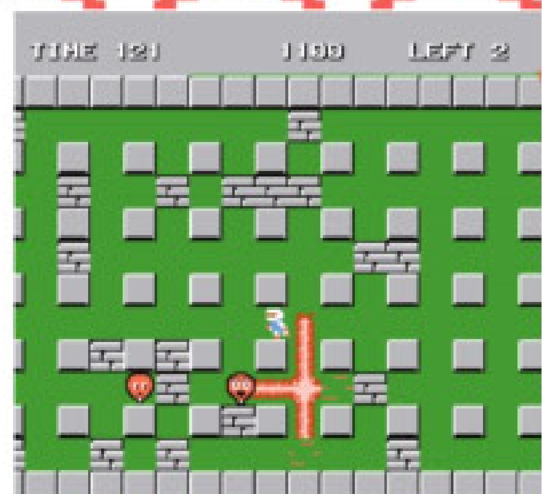
THE YEAR WAS 1983. Over in America, big-hair rockers Styx were providing some idea of how Japan was viewed by Westerners with their 'Mr. Roboto' (and its unforgettable lyric, "domou arigatou misuta Roboto"). But in Japan, contemporary music and fashion confirmed the country's capacity to contain contradictions: Western hits like Irene Cara's 'Flashdance… What A Feeling' rubbed shoulders at the top of the charts with traditional enka music from the likes of Hosokawa Takashi and Eisaku Okawa (whose 'Sazanka no Yado' was the best-selling single over the whole of the year); girl group Warabe warbled out wholesome ditties while Seiko Matsuda set out on a career whose length would eventually earn her the nickname 'Eternal Idol'. Pop starlet Hiroko Yakushimaru, meanwhile, managed to combine musical success with movie fame, appearing in Sonny Chiba movie *Legend Of The Eight Samurai* and topping the charts with the theme music to *Detective Story*.

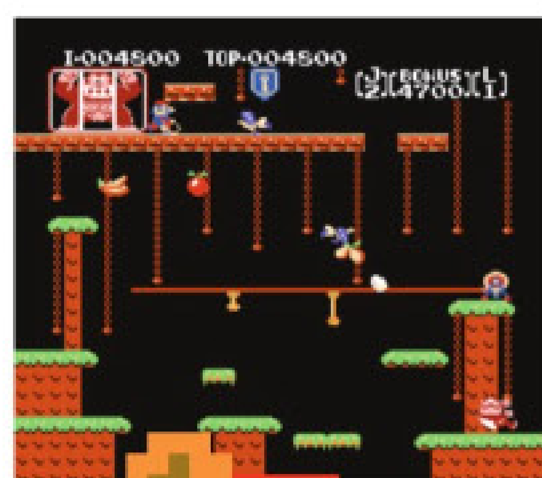
Elsewhere in movies, the unlikely pairing of musical spaceman David Bowie and TV funnyman Beat Takeshi won critical praise for their deeply affecting performances in *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*; *Nankyoku Monogatari* was about to establish itself as a timeless classic, about an ill-fated scientific expedition to the South Pole and the Huskies that were left behind; and a celluloid version of manga serial *Barefoot Gen* brought the horrors of Hiroshima to the big screen. Another manga to receive a movie outing was *Urusei Yatsura*, courtesy of the then-unheard-of Mamoru Oshii. And while it would be another few years before he would receive his own movie adaptation, Kenshiro was just starting out on his neck-twisting, face-breaking journey across apocalyptic wastelands in the new *Fist Of The North Star* comic strip.

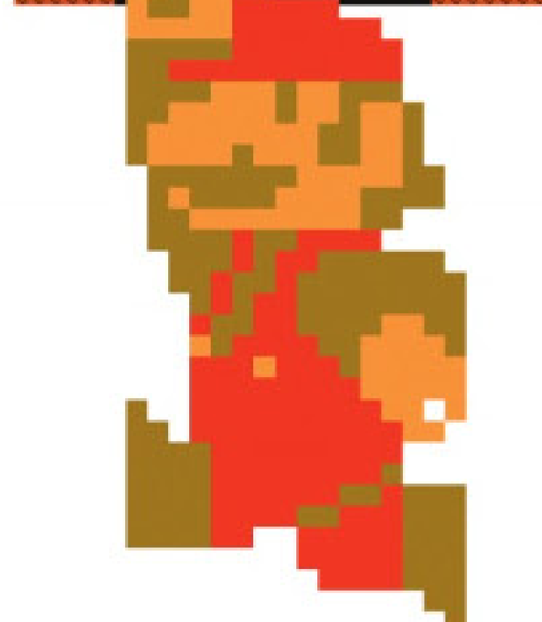
Japanese TV schedules also gave some hint of what was to come for Western audiences, thanks to shows like *Beast King GoLion* (later adapted as *Voltron*), *Genesis Climber MOSPEADA* (later adapted as part of the *Robotech* series), and *Dynaman* (part of the CONTINUED>.







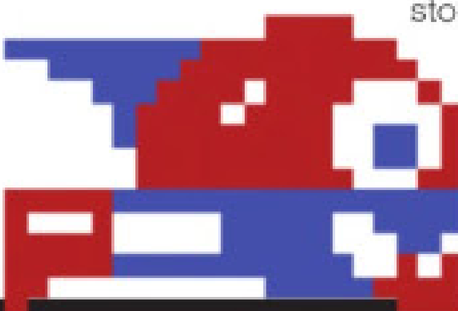
Super Sentai series that would later be turned into *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*). In politics, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone was busy cultivating the special Ron-Yasu friendship with Ronald Reagan, while former prime minister Kakuei Tanaka was about to be found guilty of taking bribes from the Lockheed Corporation.

And in videogames, the release of the Nintendo Family Computer was about to change the world.

You probably know much of the story already. It launched in July, for 14,800 yen, with three games available at launch: *Donkey Kong*, *Donkey Kong, Jr.*, and *Popeye*. Although it got off to a slow start, and was hampered by a product recall to sort out a dodgy motherboard, by the end of the year it was the best-selling console in Japan. It would go on to be manufactured until 2003. It marked the former playing card manufacturer Nintendo's transition from traditional toys to electronic entertainment, and the start of its continued rise to become one of Japan's most valuable companies.

IN A VIDEOGAME landscape characterised by single-purpose handheld toys like the Game And Watch, or underwhelming technological throwbacks like Epoch's Cassette Vision, the Famicom was a technological marvel, boasting a Ricoh 2A03 8-bit processor, 2 KB of onboard RAM, an unprecedented palette of 52 colours and five sound channels. Housed in attractive red and white plastic, with two controllers wired into the back of the console, it carried over the D-pad and two button combination from the Game And Watch, and even incorporated a microphone into one of the joypads.

But what did it actually feel like when it launched? What was it like to play? One man who remembers very well is Japanese comedian Shinya Arino, the modern face of retro gaming thanks to his TV show GameCenter CX. "I first played *Mario Bros.* at my friend Endo-kun's house," he says, recounting a story that will be familiar to gamers of all ages. "We had this rule that we'd swap places when we lost. But since Endo owned the game he played as Mario, and the other five of us had to take turns playing as Luigi. We had to swap places after using three lives, but as soon as I had won twice, Endo hit the reset button and stupidly told us, 'That didn't count.' We all ignored Endo for a whole week after that."

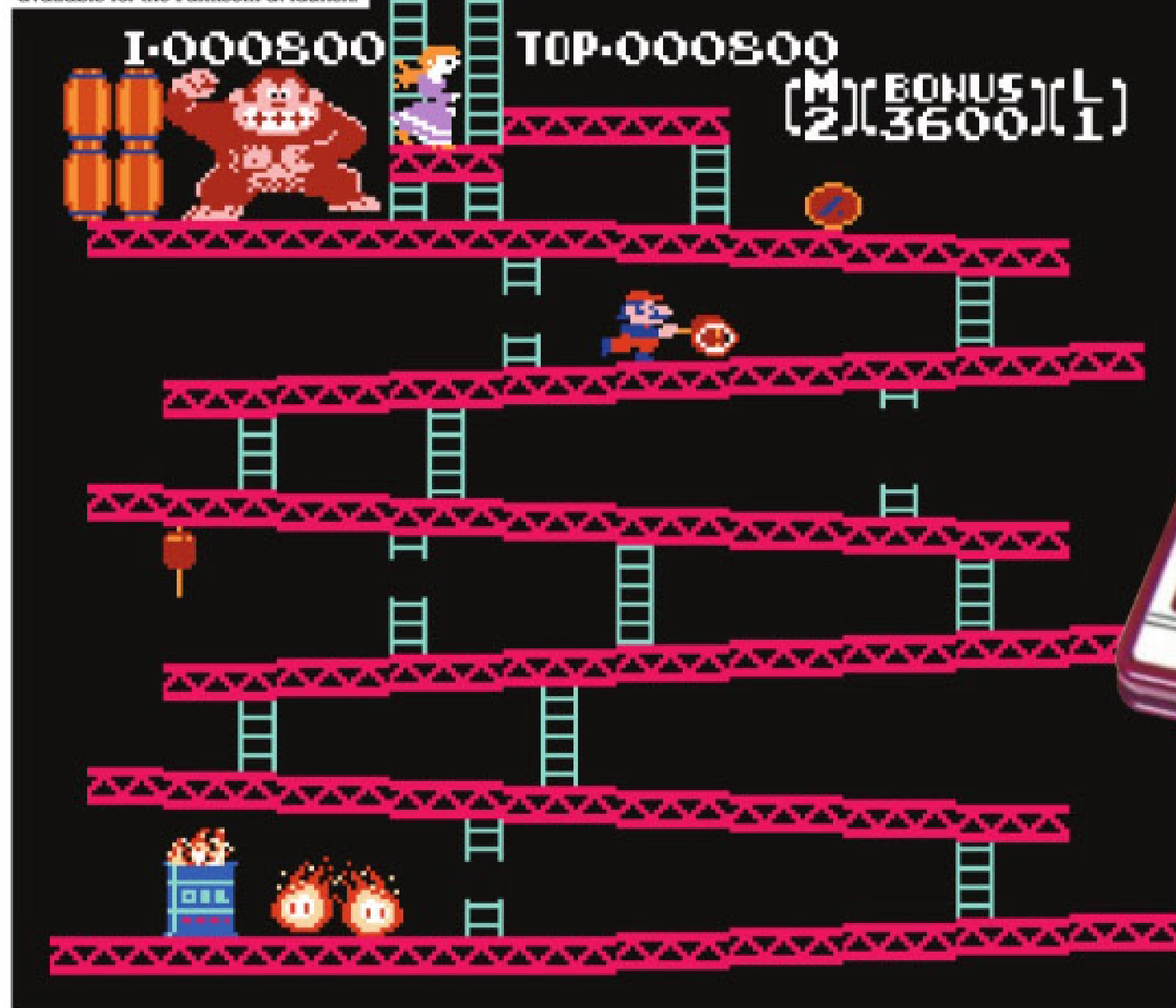


ARCADES WERE WHERE DELINQUENTS HUNG OUT, AND I DIDN'T WANT TO GET EXTORTED MONEY

Some things, it seems, never change. But what was it like to walk home with the future of games under your arm? "I wasn't bought one until 1986, when I was in the second year of junior high school," Arino continues. "On the way home from buying it, three high school students walked up to me and said, menacingly, 'Look what you've got…' I just got on my bike as if I hadn't heard them and pedalled home, as I didn't want to lose my Famicom!"

Thank the videogaming gods that he got it back safely. But crucially, the Famicom was responsible for removing this sort of undesirable element from the world of videogames. Just as Atari had done in America, Nintendo brought videogames out of seedy, smoky arcades and into the safety and security of the living room. "Arcades were places where delinquents hung out, and I didn't want to get extorted money, so I didn't go to them," says Arino.

Nor did Meijin Takahashi – famous at the time for his super-fast trigger finger, and now a general manager at Hudson.



Donkey Kong was one of just three games available for the Famicom at launch.



Takeshi No Chousenjou, an oft-derided Famicom game starring Beat Takeshi.

"The first game I played was Shigeru Miyamoto's *Donkey Kong*," says Takahashi. "At that time, a cheap computer was about 60,000 yen, so I was really surprised that you could play arcade quality games on hardware that cost 14,800 yen, with games that cost 4,000 yen. And after seeing that game, Hudson decided to make games for the Famicom, so I think it had a big impact for all of us working at the company."

In spite of the arcade quality, however, the scale of that impact was by no means assured when the Famicom launched. Atsuhiro Eguchi is now a director at a videogame company, but he also remembers the day he brought his new Famicom home, with a copy of *Donkey Kong*. "'The graphics are exactly like the arcade!' I thought at the time," he says. "I remember my older brother asking me why I'd got this no-name game console, and that I should have got the MSX which had loads of games. But in the end, the Famicom was an explosive success, so I was proved right."

INDEED, THE FAMICOM'S huge colour palette easily eclipsed Sega's SG-1000, released on the same day as the Famicom with a mere 16 colours; it was cheaper than ASCII's MSX, and its technical superiority doomed Casio's PV-1000 to failure when it was released later in the year. "In terms of the price, and the quality of the graphics, I think the Famicom was better than the MSX, but since you could program the MSX the two weren't really comparable," points out Takahashi. "But the Famicom's impact was like a typhoon, and all of the other game machines got a bit lost in its wake, I think."

Or, as Eguchi puts it: "I think I bought the Famicom about a year after it came out, when it wasn't very well known, and there were still only about five games. I wanted one to play *Donkey Kong*, so I went to the toy section of a department store to get it. But when I got there the salesman tried to steer me away, saying, 'the Sega SG-1000 is the same price and has more games.' But after hesitating, my mum said, 'The Famicom looks better, so why don't you buy one?' I guess I owe her one. Because now it's clear that that choice made me who I am today."

Indeed the Famicom shaped the lives of many developers and franchises that are still around today. Arino, for example, has been CONTINUED >.

Shinya Arino

We talk Famicom with Japan's premier retro game celebrity



IF THERE IS a living testimony to the enduring appeal of Famicom gaming, it's Shinya Arino. In Japan he's best known as one half of comedy duo Yoiko. Together with his partner Masaru Hamaguchi, he's a permanent fixture on Japanese TV, performing traditional Manzai comedy, appearing on variety shows, and even taking part in island-survival reality shows.

Among gamers, however, he's best known as the 'section chief' of *Game Center CX*, a comedy show (also available on DVD) that's almost entirely dedicated to retro gaming. Imagine Mitchell and Webb playing SNES games for 12 hours straight while snacking on fast food and you're halfway to imagining what a British equivalent might be like, but it's hard to see how any British comedians could compete with either Arino's madcap brand of comedy or his impressive videogame skills, honed as a schoolboy over sessions of *Super Mario Bros.* with his friends. The show sees Arino playing through a different retro game every episode, trying to overcome their brutally hard difficulty curves in the space of a single day.

Although he has been known to play the occasional PlayStation or Dreamcast title, the majority of the games featured on *Game Center CX* are Famicom games, from *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* to *Derby Stallion*.

And throughout the challenges, Arino receives help from his subordinates in various ways, whether it's bringing him some snacks or a strategy guide, to slapping a special type of sticking plaster on his forehead to keep him cool – they've even been known to play the actual games when things get a bit too tough. Not only has the *Game Center CX* series helped Arino meet some of his videogame heroes, it's also earned him an honorary membership of Namco Bandai Games, and given him the chance to help design his very own videogame. *Game Center CX: Arino No Chousenjou* was released in Japan in 2007 (and later released in the West as *Retro Game Challenge*) – earning a respectable 33/40 from Famitsu and receiving lavish praise from Western critics. But Arino's dalliance with videogames doesn't end there. He also stars in the DS island survival game *Yoiko No Mujintou Seikatsu*, which, bringing the story full circle, is based on one of Yoiko's non-videogame TV shows.

So what do those high school friends, with whom he sharpened his videogame skills think of his success as a videogamer? "I'm not really in touch with my friends from that time so I don't know," says Arino. "But they probably watch my shows and think, 'My God, that guy used to be the number one biggest loser in our group!'"





The game below needs no introduction. It was as successful and important in Japan as it was the rest of the videogaming world.

able to meet many of his gaming heroes thanks to his *Game Center CX* show, including Shigeru Miyamoto and – indeed – Meijin Takahashi. "I was a bit surprised by Meijin Takahashi – his trademark hairdo has changed [from a fluffy perm and cap] to a skin head. They should call him Takahashi Sennin [a Japanese word meaning 'wise old master']."

And as for the wise old sage himself? He has also been able to meet several of his heroes: "I've been able to meet some of the people responsible for the modern videogame industry," says Takahashi. "Like the creator of *Space Invaders*, Tomohiro Nishikado, and the man responsible for *Pac-Man*, Toru Iwatani. I've also been able to become good friends with the creator of *Xevious*, Masanobu Endo."

FRANCHISES LIKE *FINAL Fantasy, Metroid, Super Mario Bros., Dragon Quest, Legend of Zelda, Mother, Kirby, Xevious, Bomberman, Donkey Kong*… all of them appeared on the Famicom, thanks to the way Nintendo opened up its new system to third-party publishers (indeed some of those publishers even designed customized chips to supplement the standard ROM cartridges that the games came on – such as Konami, for example, which developed the VRC 6 and VRC 7 sound chips to increase the quality of sound in its games). But these games represent just the tip of the iceberg. The Famicom was home to an avalanche of now dimly-remembered, half-forgotten, quirky, strange, or just plain awful games.

Of the former, some notable entries include the detective adventure game, *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken*, by *Dragon Quest* creator Yuji Horii; an early rhythm-action oddity called *Otocky*; and proto-survival-horror title, *Sweet Home* – a precursor to game designer Shinji Mikami's later BioHazard that was, oddly enough, produced by Juzo Itami, the director of cult classic comedy movie *Tampopo*.

THERE WERE A LOT OF RUBBISH GAMES WITH FANCY MARKETING SLOGANS

As for the awful, there were so many of them that they even earned their own slang term: 'kusoge' – literally, 'crap games'. "*Zunou Senkan Garu* is the worst, I think," recalls Takahashi. "It's not about how difficult it is; it's the fact that you need to collect 100 items before the end of the game and even the mid-level bosses are unforgiving. And if you're defeated you have to go right back to the start, without your items. Even thinking about it now, it's too harsh."

But it wasn't the only such title. "I remember there were a lot of rubbish games with fancy marketing slogans," says Arino. "A hundred screens of *Bungeling Bay*, for example. Those were the sorts of game I ended up buying…"

Interestingly though, *Bungeling Bay* was the first game designed by *Sim City* creator Will Wright, and it made use of the microphone embedded in the console's second controller. Another game to do so was the universally acknowledged classic of kusoge, *Takeshi No Chousenjou*. Today, Arino has starred in a couple of videogames, but he's not the first famous comedian to do so. *Takeshi No Chousenjou* was designed by and stars Japanese comedian and polymath 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano, in the sort of bizarre succession of non-sequiturs that encapsulates the career of its author. Another star of Japan's comedy scene to grace his own (more conventional) game was *Sanma Akashiya*, who lent his name and likeness to Namco's detective adventure game *Sanma no Meitantei*.

THE REAL COST OF GAMING

IN 1983, A new Famicom cost 14,800 Yen, and games cost 4,000 Yen. Here's what else your Yen would have bought you back then:

¥100: A bottle or can of soft drink (¥150 today)

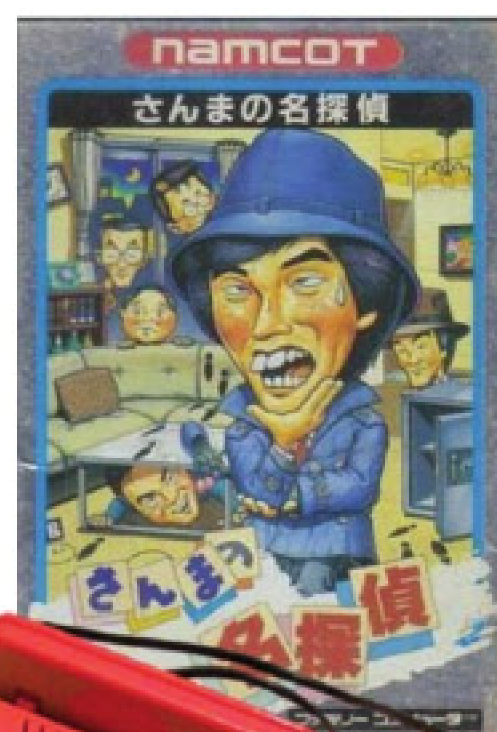
¥170: A copy of Shonen Jump (¥240 today)

¥200: A packet of cigarettes (¥350 today)

¥1000-3000: A men's haircut in the city of Tokyo (up to ¥3,500 today)

¥3,900 (adult), **¥2,800** (child): Tokyo Disneyland Day Passport (¥5,800 and ¥3,900 today, respectively)

¥18,000: A randusero (the standard heavy duty schoolbag used by elementary students – about ¥30,000 today)





And yet another real-life videogame star was Arino's hero, *Meijin Takahashi*, who inspired the entire *Takahashi Meijin No Boken Jima* series, originally an adaptation of the arcade title *Wonder Boy*. "I was at the development site with the Executive Vice President at that time," recounts Takahashi, "when he said, 'Takahashi is really popular right now, so why don't we turn this character into him?' It was the first I heard about it, but it made me really happy, because I never thought another me would be able to go on adventures in a videogame. Although the kids seemed to like seeing me in trouble and tried losing the game in front of me on purpose, in the end I got to talk to more kids, so it was really fun."

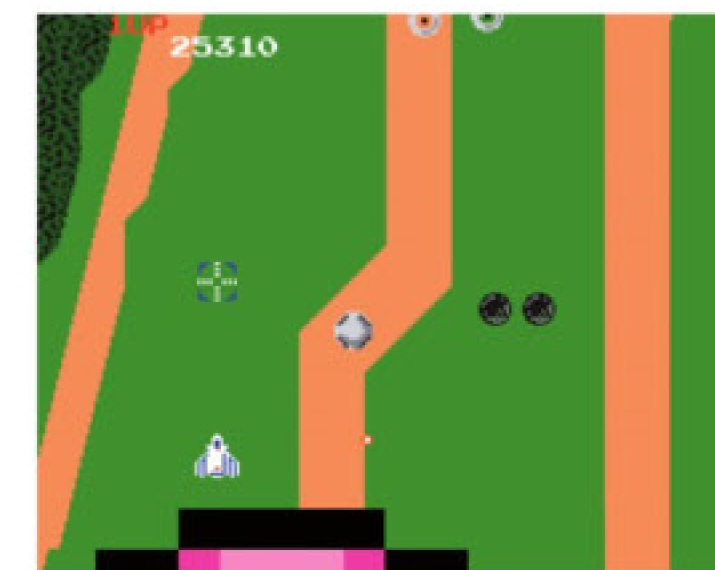
THOSE KIDS, IT seems, have never really forgotten just how much fun it was. In Japan today, as in the West, there is a healthy retro gaming scene, typified by Arino's TV show, mobile phone games, and stores like Akihabara's Super Potato. So why, exactly, do Famicom games boast such an enduring appeal? "I think it's because those games were based on a single, simple goal, like saving the princess, or protecting the planet," reckons Arino himself. "They were simple, but deep." Takahashi agrees: "Because videogame characters were drawn out of so few pixels, you were able to fill in the gaps with your imagination. Today's graphics are much more realistic and beautiful, but I think people still remember that time when they were able to create worlds of their own."

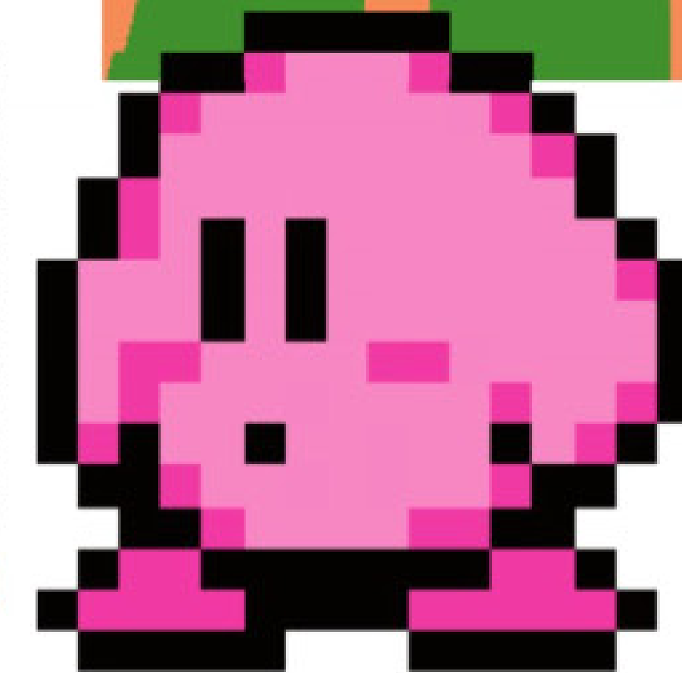
And that, really, was the key to the success of the Famicom, in Japan as it was in the West. The Famicom was a defining moment in the history of videogames, taking games out of seedy arcades and into the living room, and launching the industry on the trajectory that has taken it to where it is today. It reoriented the industry towards Japan and resuscitated an entertainment format that many people in the West considered to have outlived its usefulness. And, perhaps most significantly, it was one of the entertainment industry's first faltering steps towards the chopped-up, rearranged, user-generated content that defines our world today.

The last game ever to be released for the Famicom was Hudson's *Takahashi Meijin No Boken Jima IV*. So perhaps it's appropriate to give the last word on the subject to Takahashi himself. "Until the appearance of the Famicom, the TV was just for receiving whatever TV shows the TV stations broadcast. The end user fundamentally couldn't do anything. But with the arrival of the Famicom, all of a sudden in your own home, on your own TV, you could control your own characters, moving around in your own adventures. For the first time you could experience these exciting things. There is nothing that can eclipse that impact."



Final Fantasy has come a long way since its Famicom origins.





MEIJIN TAKAHASHI

Retro memories from the fastest fingers in the East

IF ARINO IS the modern face of Famicom gaming, his equivalent throughout the Famicom's heyday was Hudson Soft's Meijin Takahashi. Like Arino today, Meijin Takahashi was recognised by everybody everywhere in 1980s Japan – which is more extraordinary for the fact that, unlike Arino, he didn't start out as a celebrity. He was just someone who worked in Hudson's PR division who happened to be really good at games – plucked from obscurity because of his uncanny ability to fire off 16 shots per second, and turned into an overnight celebrity.

"For my family it was a big deal, especially because I had kept it quiet – until one day they spotted me on TV. One of my relatives was a teacher at the time and she asked me to sign autographs for one of her students who refused to go to school." Takahashi's 16-shots-a-second quickly became his trademark, as he travelled up and down the country and starred in all sorts of TV shows to promote his company's videogames.

"The kids of that time, their eyes sparkled," he remembers. "I attended a lot of public events where people were playing games, so I got to see a lot of people playing them. Of course, if they got knocked out after two minutes they looked disappointed, but, when they were successful, their whole face lit up and they forgot everything else for a moment. Whenever I remember those faces, I feel very lucky to be Takahashi Meijin."



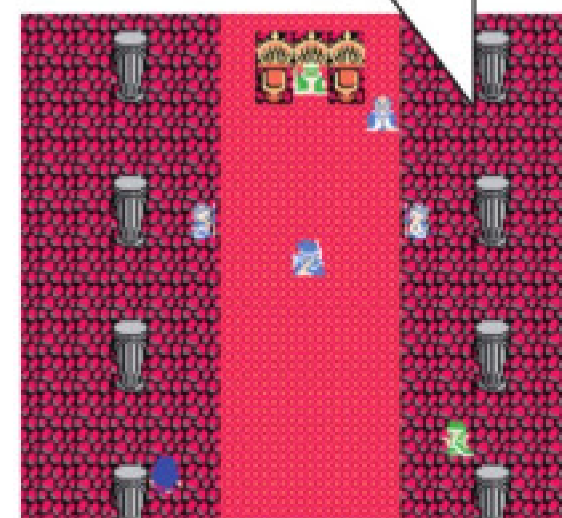
VOX POPULI

We asked several people connected to the Japanese videogame industry for their memories of Famicom gaming. Here are their answers:

Questions we asked:

Q1. What are your favourite Famicom games of all time?
Q2. Do you remember any particularly bad or strange games?
Q3. Do you remember the first time you played on a Famicom? Do you remember how you felt?
Q4. Did you ever play foreign games on the Famicom?
Q5. What other media made an impression on you at that time? What sort of books were you reading for example - and did you ever go to game arcades?
Q6. Did you own any other games consoles, like the MSX?
Q7. Why do you think Famicom games are still popular?
Q8. Do you have any other thoughts or particular memories that stand out from that time?

Kei, translator, 31



A1: *Dragon Quest III*, *Mother*, *Rockman* series.
A2: *Takeshi No Chousenjou.*
A3: I bought *Spartan-X*. I remember being surprised by the lively sound effects and the speed of progression. And it was pretty difficult!
A4: I played *Earthbound Zero* – the Western version of *Mother.*
A5: I read Shonen Jump, Comic Bon Bon, Coro Coro Comics and when I wasn't playing videogames I made Gundam models and mini 4WD cars. I wasn't allowed to watch much TV.
A7: I think there were a lot of quality games back then. And people who were kids back then want to relive those memories.

Ryo, localisation manager, 33



A1: *Ice Climber*, *Balloon Fight*, *Spartan X*, *Twinbee.*

A3: I played *Mario Bros* at a friend's house.

A5: I had an MSX so I also programmed in BASIC. I read *Coro Coro Comics*, watched anime (mainly by Fujiko Fujio, the creators of *Doraemon*) and played with rollerskates and R/C cars.
A6: I owned an MSX.
A7: Because the Famicom generation has grown up.
A8: I remember playing with Hudson's Shooting Watch [a gadget that went on sale in 1987 that allowed you to test your trigger speed].

Yohichi, manager, 36



A1: *Balloon Fight*, *Motocross Champion*, *Bomberman*, *Mario Bros.*
A2: Because I was only little I thought everything was great!
A3: I bought *Mario Bros.* from a high street toy store. All I remember about it now is that I was almost trembling with excitement. I remember thinking that it was unlike any other toy I'd ever played!
A4: Only on the PC
A5: Now that I think about it, I played outside a lot. I listened to The Beatles, I read whatever was available in the library, collected *Kinniku Man* and *Game Center No Arashi*, and watched *Gundam* on the TV.
A6: My friend had an MSX, but I didn't have one.

A7: The games were simple and intuitive, and the game characters were cute.

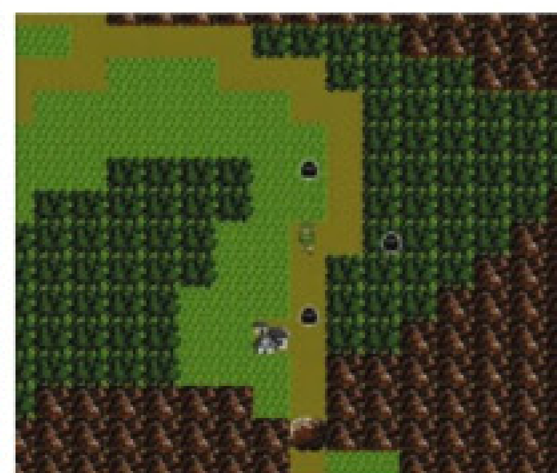
A8: I remember the excitement on the day that *Dragon Quest* came out!

Yu, product manager, 30



A1: *Dragon Quest.*
A2: *Takeshi No Chousenjou.*
A3: At the time my parents were really strict, so they wouldn't buy me the Famicom because it could only be used for games. So I had no choice but to get a PC, because it could be used to study - when I went to my friends' houses we'd play Famicom games; and when they came to mine we played PC games. The first time I played *Super Mario Bros.*, at a friend's house, I remember being surprised at the size of the screen - because the most popular games before the Famicom were the Game And Watch games!
A4: I played *Wizardry* on the PC, but I don't remember playing anything on the Famicom. But at that time I really don't remember being able to tell the difference - back then even the Japanese developers names were in katakana [a Japanese script that's usually used for western names].
A5: Just as the Famicom came out, there were a lot of FM radio stations starting up in the Kanto region, so I listened to a lot of western music. I remember listening to Starship, Heart, Wham, A-Ha, and stuff like that. I didn't go to arcades because of the scary older kids.
A6: I only owned an NEC PC.
A7: I think one reason is that they offer an alternative to the over-complication of modern games. And because they were made by such small teams, they feel more handcrafted than modern assembly-line productions.
A8: I remember the infamous 'Spell of Restoration' password system in *Dragon Quest* so, even though I didn't have a Famicom, I went back and forth to my friend's house until I cleared it.

Yoshisha, company director, 34



A1: *Zelda II*, *Kerunaguru*, *Dark Lord*
A2: *B-Wing*, *Bokosuka Wars*
A3: The first game I bought was *Ninjakun*. The first game I played was *Mario Bros.* – my feelings at the time were: "You can play these things at home?!!"
A4: I enjoyed games like *Spelunker* and *Spy Vs. Spy* without ever realising that they were actually Western games.
A5: If I wasn't playing games I was at cram school. I liked reading *Dr. Slump*. Arcades were too scary so I didn't go, but my brother did and I heard all about the games from him. It made me really want to play them.
A6: I owned a PC Engine and a Game Boy.

A7: I think the unadorned, naked simplicity of the games gave a lasting impression and depth of experience that is impossible to forget.

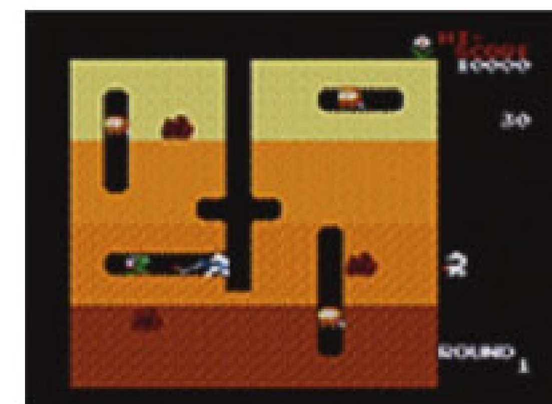
A8: I remember my parents worried that I was playing on the Famicom too much so I had to keep pretending I wasn't playing it. I remember my local toy shop - an official Nintendo outlet - used to let us play new games for three minutes at a time, even though it was probably illegal. So I used to take turns playing with kids I didn't even know until we'd cleared the game. Trying to complete *The Legend Of Zelda* was really difficult!

Naoyuki, product manager, 37



A1: *Mach Rider*, *Excitebike.*
A2: *Famicom Jump*, *Takeshi No Chousenjou.*
A3: I bought mine in August of 1983. When my dad asked me if I wanted a Famicom or a Cassette Vision for my birthday, I replied without hesitation, with one word: Famicom. The Famicom had only just come out, and the Cassette Vision was more fashionable, so it was a tricky decision, but when Namco games came out it became really popular.
A4: *Karateka.*
A7: I think it's because it's mixed up with our memories of youth.
A8: I remember *Dragon Quest* selling so well that the owner of a toy shop in my neighbourhood started bundling it with other games to get rid of them – which was against the law, so he got arrested.

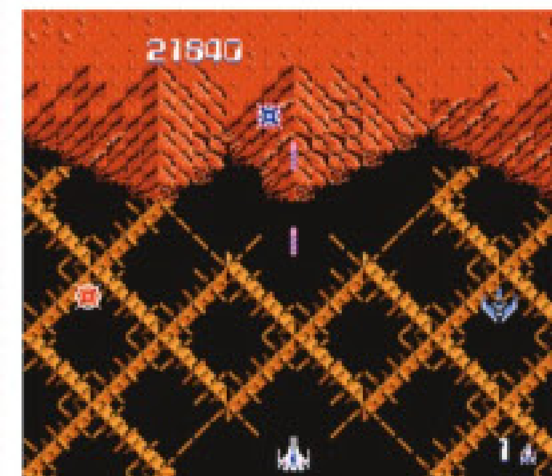
Misato, housewife, 30



A1: *Dig Dug*, *Mario Bros.*, *Solomon's Key*, the *Dragon Quest* series.
A2: *Atlantis No Nazo*, *Transformers: Convoy No Nazo*, *Hoshi Wo Miru Hito*, *Takeshi No Chousenjou*, *Ikinari Musician.*
A3: My dad bought it for me in the summer of 1987 – I don't remember where. Because he bought it as a study aid, the first games I played were educational – probably *Keisan Game Sansu*. I think my first emotion was disappointment that I couldn't understand the controls.
A5: I listened to a lot of Western music. I don't really remember what I was reading, but I read a lot. And I used to play on roller skates. I'd go to the arcade two or three times a week.
A6: Super Famicom, Game Boy and the PC Engine.
A7: I think there are a lot of people who can't forget the excitement and surprise of the Famicom launch. I think those people still want to cling to their hopes and dreams of that time.

A8: I remember sitting up all night with my sister and completing *My Life My Love: Boku No Yume: Watashi No Negai*

Atsuhiro, director, 37

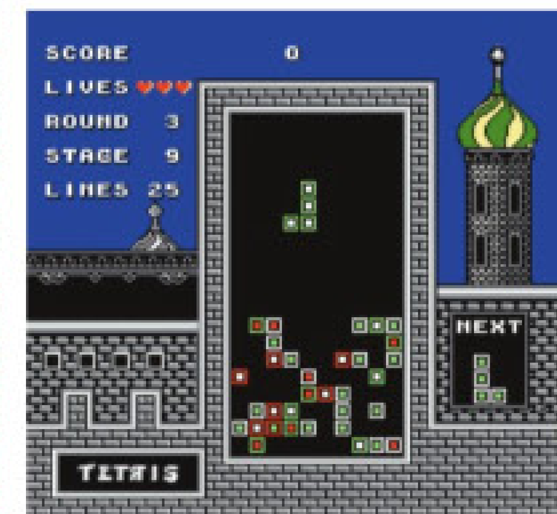


A1: *Zanac*, *Castlevania*, *Metroid*, *Legend Of Zelda*, *Solomon's Key*, *Dead Zone*, *Wrecking Crew*, *Ice Climber*, *Gradius*, *Dig Dug*, *Final Fantasy III*, *Super Mario Bros.*
A2: Disk System's *Relics: Ankoku Yousai*. But at that time, games were so expensive that I really didn't buy too many kusoge.
A3: *Donkey Kong*, which I bought with the console from a regular department store.
A4: *Lode Runner*. It had an Edit Mode so I could make my own stages. Compared to the original they were kind of funny. I tried to make levels that my older brother couldn't complete. In the end I didn't really manage, but I learnt how much fun it is to make games - which turned out to be pretty important in the end.
A5: My favourite manga were *Dr. Slump* and *Wingman*. And *Gundam* models became popular really quickly. I ended up making so many I had to give them away to my friends. I used to play in the river, catching fish. Maybe I enjoyed that more than playing on the Famicom. I did go to arcades, but I didn't really like playing games in front of other people, so I'd just watch other people play and look forward to the games coming out on the Famicom."

A6: I really wanted an MSX, but the graphics on the Famicom were better.

A7: Because of the hardware limitations, game designers had no choice but to appeal directly to your senses.
A8: After playing *Lode Runner* I only wanted to buy games that had an edit mode, so I was initially disappointed when I found out that *Super Mario Bros* didn't have one. But as I got more and more addicted I became certain that it was the best game in the world. Shortly after that, the sales boom really started and all of my friends who hadn't been interested in videogames got hold of a Famicom and I remember being really happy that I had more friends to play games with.

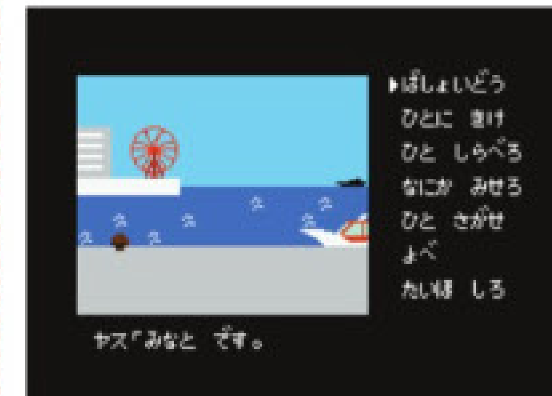
Kenichi, programmer, 30



A1: *Tetris*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Dragon Quest.*
A4: *Bungeling Bay*. I didn't understand how to resupply so I kept having to go back to the start. And *Tetris*. It was my favourite puzzle game at the time, and still is now.
A5: *Dragon Ball*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *Baseball* and *Soccer* were popular; I used to play hanafuda and shougi.

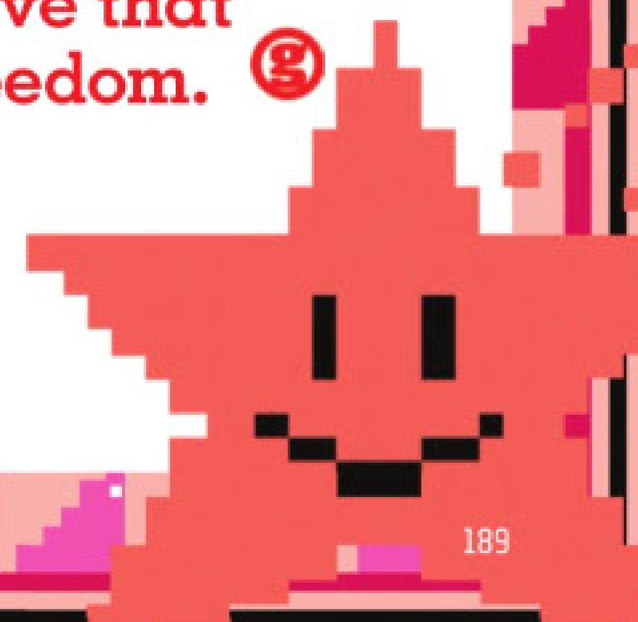
A7: They're easy to enjoy because the rules are simple, and the graphics and sound let you use the power of your own imagination.

Mika, producer, 37



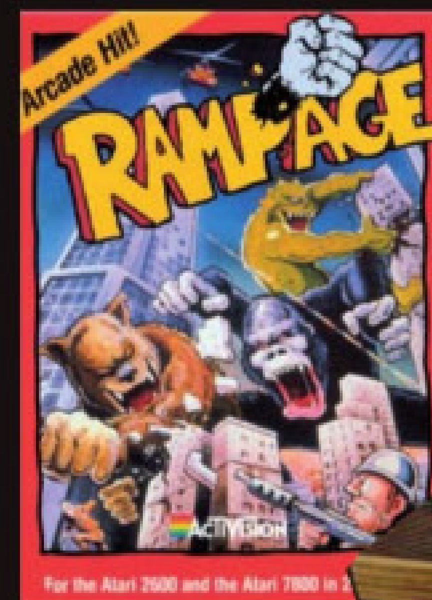
A1: *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken*, *Mario Bros.*, *Dragon Quest* series.
A2: *Takeshi No Chousenjou.*
A3: Probably *Mario Bros.*, but I don't really remember it.
A4: I didn't really know which games were foreign at the time.
A5: Kinniku Man was in fashion, and Namennayo cat cards.
A6: Only the Famicom Disk System.
A7: I think people still remember how good they were at the time. And unlike today's games you couldn't save halfway through, so they were more frantic.

A8: I think even though we played games back then, we were also much more free to play outside, even after it got dark. I wonder if today's kids have that freedom.



CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing arcade ports under the spotlight

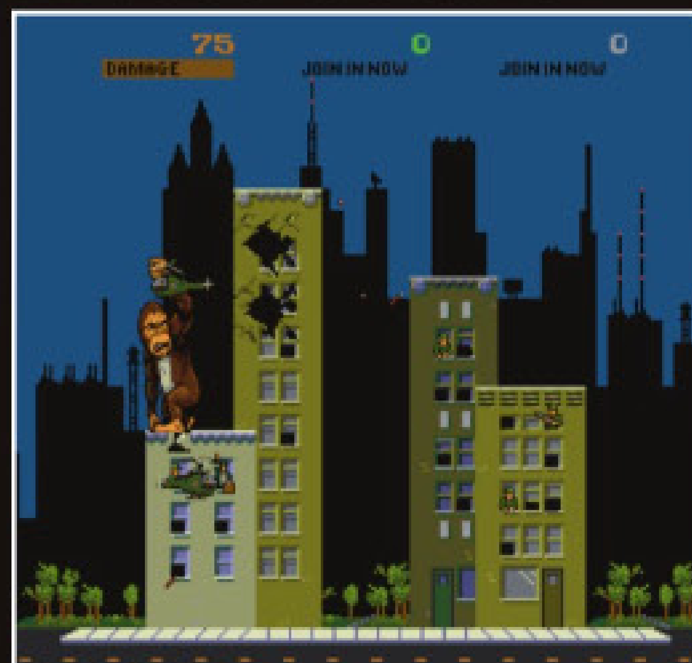


SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1989
Publisher: Activision
Developer: In-House

Rampage

THE HYPE

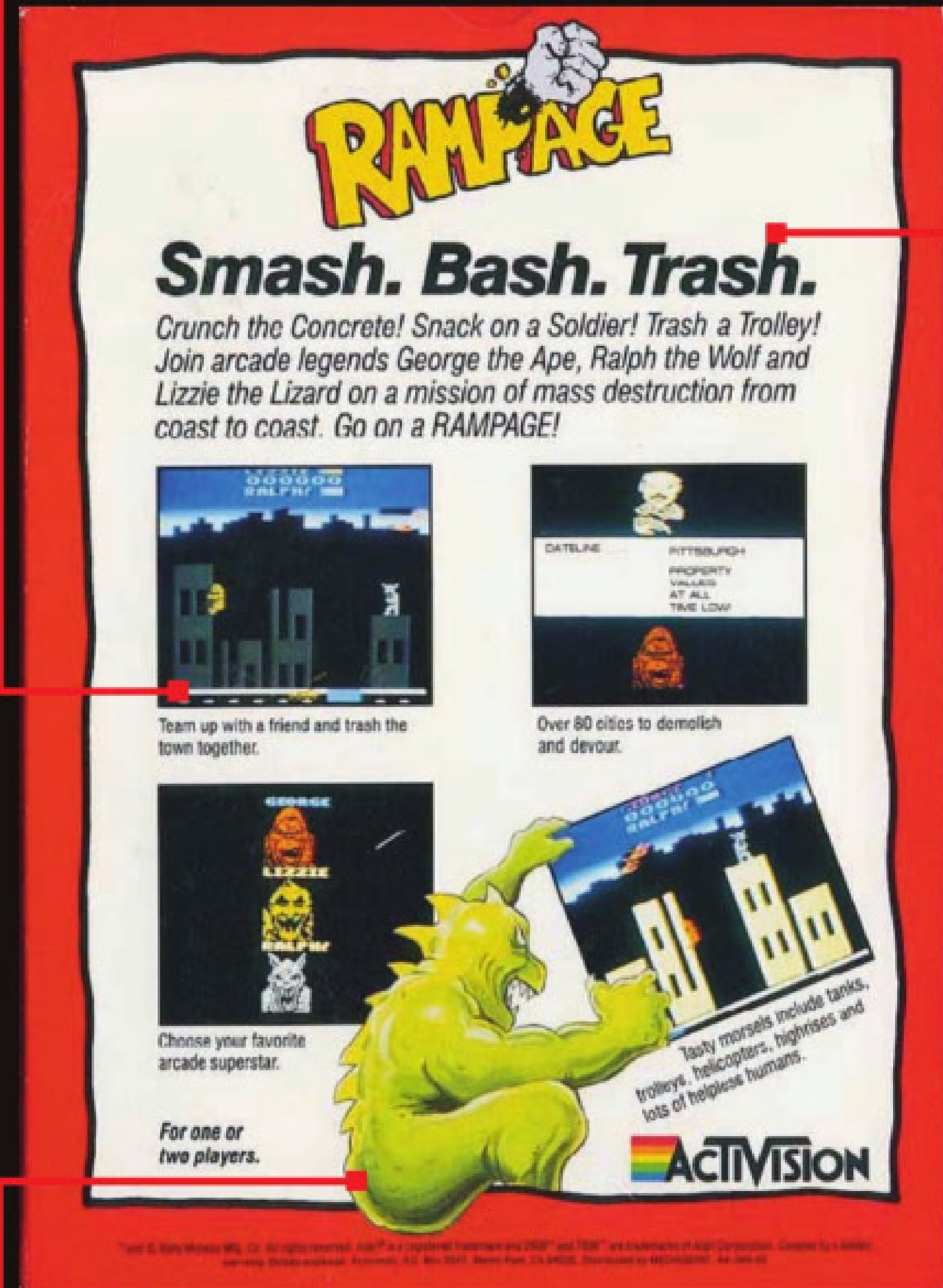


Released in 1986, Midway's *Rampage* was one of the first arcade titles to really make you feel like a giant beast. Allowing you to play as one of three monsters resembling King Kong, Godzilla or a giant werewolf, it allowed you to roam through city streets, tearing down skyscrapers, eating civilians and smashing up military vehicles. Unlike previous arcade hits, *Rampage* wasn't a score-attack game, and the looping levels meant that you wouldn't even play it for the challenge of reaching the end. Instead, it was one of the first visceral videogame experiences, designed to simulate an exciting situation that just wasn't possible in real life. You played *Rampage* because you liked being able to smash things up without consequence. For teenagers and children, this was an attractive prospect, and proved extremely popular at home.

THE WARNING SIGNS

The arcade game featured a hugely popular three-player mode, but the Atari conversion only allows for two at once. It's already a poor conversion.

Huge headlines draw attention to the word 'Trash'. Is this a subtle hint about the game's quality?



Lizzie seems intent on smashing up this screenshot. Even the stars of the game can't stand it.



THE REALITY

WITH NO compelling scoring system or difficulty level, *Rampage* relies on the ability to wow with its visuals and keep you amused with its fun gameplay. Sadly, the Atari 2600 conversion achieved neither of these essential tasks. The city is dull and lifeless with so little detail that you can't possibly enjoy its destruction, while the controls are so clumsy that playing becomes more of a chore than a pleasure. It does have some things going for it – the monster animation is great, especially when you take damage and shrink back to human form – but that's not enough to save this bland and joyless conversion.

1 The buildings are as bland and blocky as you could possibly imagine. With so little detail, there's no satisfaction in destroying them, especially as they blink, rather than slowly crumble, to the ground. And why are they all the same colour?

2 No matter what we tried, we couldn't find a way to grab civilians from windows and eat them. The box art boasts that you can eat people, just as in the arcade game, but George's hands didn't even reach the windows when we played.

3 The monsters are quite well animated but really difficult to control. With only one button, jump has to be mapped to the stick but, weirdly, holding the fire button will make your monster hover and slide across the screen.

What You Should Have Played It On



Of all the 8-bit conversions, the Sega Master System port is perhaps the best. Featuring detailed backgrounds and smooth controls, it is automatically better than the 2600 version and, unless we're imagining things, it's actually a bit quicker than the arcade original.



BEHIND THE SCENES

SIN & PUNISHMENT

By 2000, Japanese game developer Treasure was one of the greatest 2D action game creators in the world. But how did it fare in making its first full-3D title? Treasure's founder and CEO, Masato Maegawa, reveals all

Released: 2000
Format: Nintendo 64
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Treasure

KEY STAFF:
Masato Maegawa
Producer
Hideyuki Suganami
Director
Atsutomo Nakagawa
Main Programmer
Yasushi Suzuki
Character Designer

IF THERE'S ONE word that best describes Japanese indie developer Treasure, then that word is 'original'. Formed in 1992 by Masato Maegawa and a handful of colleagues from Konami, the developer first intended to move away from the safe sequels it had previously been set to work on, and debuted with a string of completely original Mega Drive games in the form of *Gunstar Heroes, Dynamite Headdy* and *Alien Solider*. Very quickly, the developer gained a reputation for extremely intense and technically impressive action games that challenged the player with complex control schemes, offering an unparalleled ability to express oneself through the game mechanics. As the developer's catalogue of software grew through the 32-bit era and into the modern age, many market realities changed the way Treasure would come to do business, but this commitment to originality and hardcore design remained. Nineteen years on, Treasure is fondly, and rightly, remembered for a wide number of its past games but, if you're a Nintendo fan, then chances are you'll be most enamoured with *Sin & Punishment*, one of the developer's most ambitious, accomplished and original videogames.

As you might expect from a developer that prides itself on such originality, Treasure refuses to be drawn on the topic of inspiration. Even on a title like *Sin & Punishment*, which owes a great deal to Nintendo's *Star Fox 64*, Masato Maegawa coldly claims that "there weren't really any" external influences. Instead he tells us that *Sin & Punishment* was designed "with the same outlook we have always had through all of our games," and cites the unique CONTINUED >.

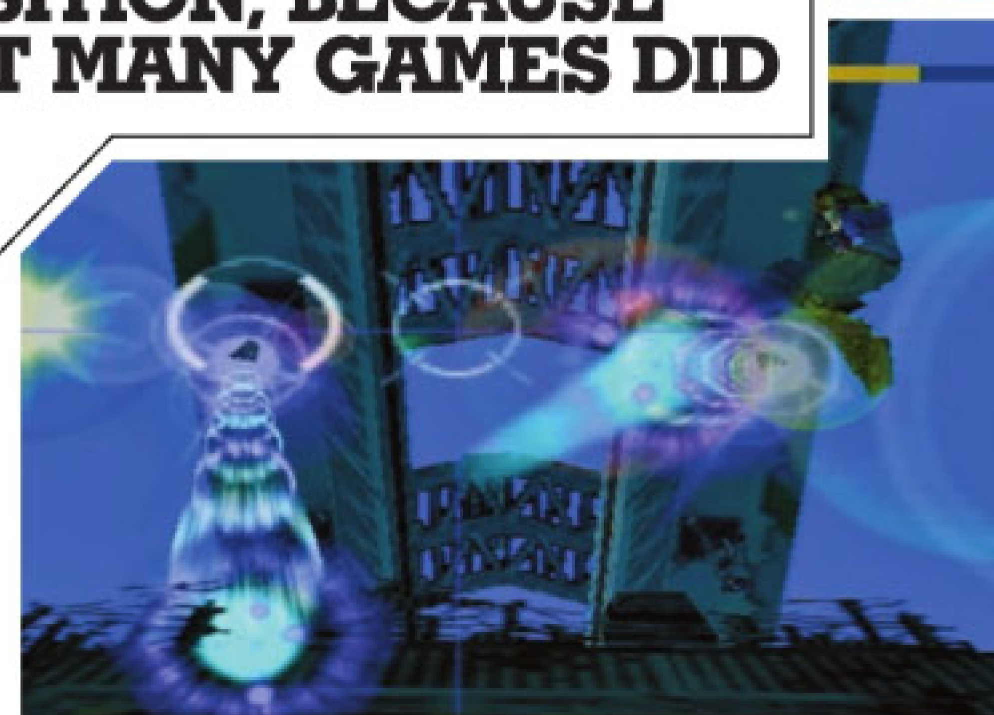
WE WANTED TO USE THE N64'S 'LEFT' POSITION, BECAUSE NOT MANY GAMES DID







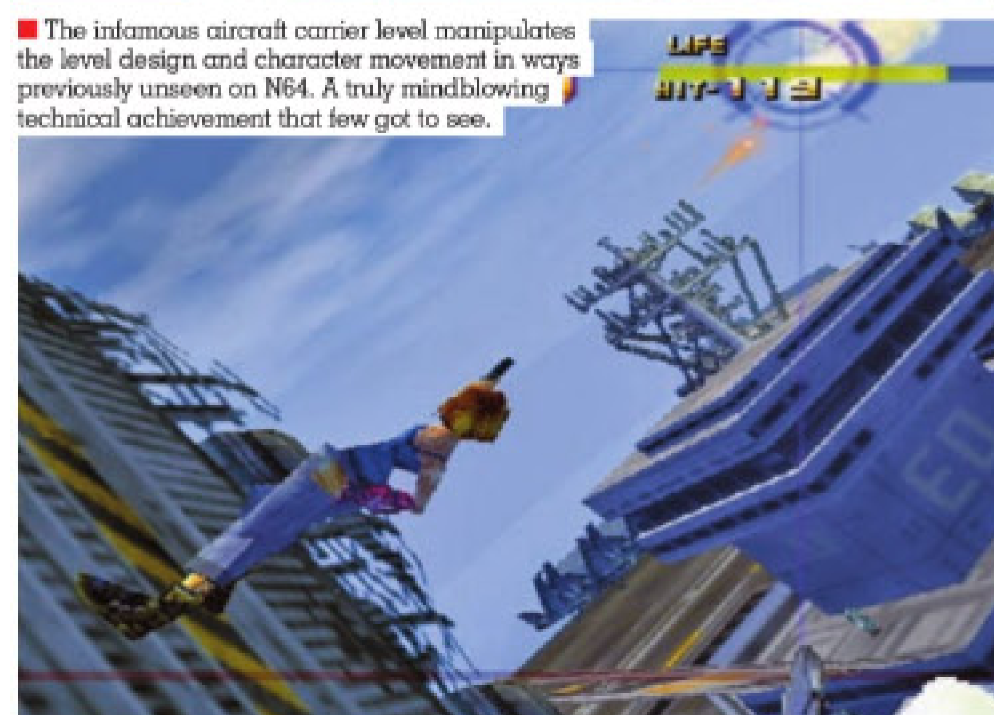
Boss battles were typically bold for a Treasure game but often unexpected in scope. Like this face-off against a single feline enemy, for example.











The infamous aircraft carrier level manipulates the level design and character movement in ways previously unseen on N64. A truly mindblowing technical achievement that few got to see.





The unusual use of the N64 controller allowed the player to independently move, aim and even quick-dodge without having to lift a finger.







FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
SHADOWMAN
I picked it up on import a couple of years back when I finally got my RGB-enabled N64. I could mention about how great the gameplay is but the reason it's a classic, in my eyes, is that its the only game that lets me fight the Planet Earth as the final boss.

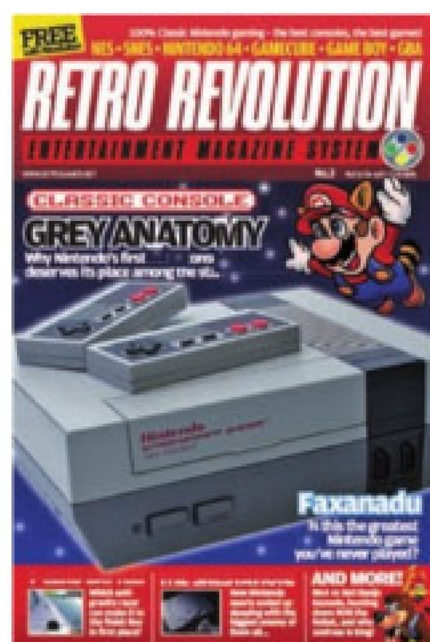
Posted by:
PIOUS THE CHOSEN
I'd never heard of it, then decided to pick it up on Virtual Console. Glad I did: great game with difficulty challenging enough to keep a *Mega Man*-schooled gamer happy. Love fighting a planet with guns too...

Posted by:
BINARYROOSTER
Still the only Jap N64 cart I own. *S&P* joined that great list of US/Jap games on various consoles that never made it over here. While the Japanese were playing this tight blaster with great visuals, we were treated to gems like *Rat Attack* and *Blues Brothers 2000*. Cheers Ninty.

Posted by:
SICKMOTH
I don't like it. Too manic, twitchy and well, not my thing. It did, however, cement in me the fact that I don't like twitch gaming, and for that I am truly grateful as it's saved me a lot of money.

Posted by:
DIFFERENTCLASS
I remember seeing screenshots and desperately wanting to play it, shots from the aircraft carrier level looked like the best thing ever but I had not the funds nor the means to import. I was over the moon when it came to the VC. I'm sure *Halo 3* was out at a similar time and it barely touched that until I was done with *Sin & Punishment*.

WHAT THEY SAID...



Many of the bosses are gigantic, mechanical monstrosities blessed with wonderfully complex attack patterns and a devastating array of firepower, and all of this without a hint of slowdown

Retro Revolution, Issue 3

technology of the N64 hardware itself as the catalyst for innovation in this particular instance. "The starting point was that we wanted to make a game that used the Nintendo 64's 'left' position, because there weren't many games that did that," he explains, referring to the different ways in which the console's highly unusual controller could be held. The three-pronged joypad with an analogue stick in the middle would usually either be held with a hand on each of the far prongs for 2D, digitally-controlled games, or with the left hand on the analogue stick for 3D games. A third option was available, however, which allowed the player to hold the analogue stick with their right hand and place their left hand over the d-pad. And it was this option, as Maegawa suggests, that had the least obvious practical applications. By adopting such a control method, *Sin & Punishment* immediately set itself apart from predecessors like *Star Fox* because it allowed you to play in a way that they did not: with one hand used to move the on-screen character and the other used to independently aim the direction of fire. This distinction subsequently allowed Treasure to create a much more complex and challenging game, with many more enemies and bullets flying around the screen for the player to shoot at and avoid respectively.



"A normal two-player mode was difficult on the hardware, so we decided to use that to our advantage and came up with a fun way of doing it," says Maegawa on *Sin & Punishment*'s option to let one player control movement and the other control shooting.



HAVING SPECIALISED in 2D action games throughout the 32-bit era, Treasure was relatively late in making the jump to 3D development, and *Sin & Punishment* was, in fact, the very first fully-three-dimensional game the team had produced. And with the Nintendo 64 notoriously one of the most difficult consoles to develop for, we can't help but think that the studio was jumping in at the deep end. Maegawa, on the other hand, claims that the transition was relatively painless, especially since *Sin & Punishment* remained within the shoot-'em-up genre Treasure's designers knew so well. "A game design like that for *Sin & Punishment* has parts where the 2D theory still applies, despite it being 3D," he says. "For example, the basic gameplay, shooting and dodging, has parts in common with 2D shooters." Just a single sitting with *Sin & Punishment* is enough to prove Maegawa's theory correct. As the camera pans and turns around the action, the perspective switches in ways that change the tone of the gameplay. From an exhilaratingly fast on-rails shooter to static screen affairs and vertical scrollers, the action runs the gamut of shoot-'em-up sub-genres and peppers them all with the sort of reassuringly familiar bullet hell patterns that players, and developers, had grown accustomed to. Another familiar element came in the form of boss battles, a divisive part of Japanese game design for modern gamers but one that Treasure is often celebrated for, because of its unique and memorable approach to the format. In *Sin & Punishment* especially, the boss battles come thick and fast. Some appear mid-way through a level, some at the end, some take up an entire stage in their own right, while others constantly trouble you throughout a chapter, appearing and re-appearing like an arch-nemesis. Such moments make for some of the greatest parts of *Sin & Punishment*, and showcase Treasure at its best. The development team clearly has a natural love and respect for this most ancient of videogame devices, and we can't help but ask why they continue to be used throughout Treasure's games, whether 2D or 3D. "I think that bosses are one of the highlights of shooters and action games, and I think that, by building in lots and lots of neat tricks and features, they are an effective method to keep users interested," answers Maegawa. "To be honest, bosses take a lot of effort to make, and there are even some bosses that we have to spend a number of months on just by themselves, but I do feel they are an indispensable part of Treasure's games."

OUR CHALLENGE WAS USING SMALL NUMBERS OF POLYGONS IN AN EFFECTIVE WAY

Designing a game in 3D is one thing, but what about the process of having to build such 3D worlds and make them function for the first time? "There weren't any big problems technically or in terms of cost," reveals Maegawa, "but what is easy and what is hard when making adjustments and corrections is completely different when working in 2D or 3D. And our biggest challenge was in working out how to use the small number of polygons in an effective way, and in increasing the number of enemies up to the limits of the hardware. That is where we placed most of our attention." On the specifics of how such impressive visuals were achieved during the N64's twilight years, however, Maegawa prefers not to discuss any specific technical tricks or breakthroughs, but instead puts the overall artistic achievement down to the competitive spirit of his employees. "The setting and the character designs and the sense of each of the designers and programmers came together and all helped to create those visuals," he insists. "The designers and programmers are always trying to surprise each other, and I think that may be the driving force behind creating a kind of unique visual image."



"We were able to build in so many neat tricks and features to prevent the players getting bored," says Maegawa. "You can play each level in completely different ways, so I hope that users are able to find fresh surprises in each of them."

Art Of Glass

THE WORKING TITLE for *Sin & Punishment* was *Glass Soldier*, but was changed at the last minute. Maegawa explains: "With the title 'Glass Soldier' we were going with the idea of a boy, weak and fragile like glass. I do think it fit the setting, but at the time Japan was flooded with English game titles written in katakana. We thought that since we had gone to the effort of creating a unique setting and graphics then the title should be a bit different too, and we came up with a title using Japanese kanji characters together with Nintendo. I think that having '罪と罰' (*Sin & Punishment*) written on the box in kanji characters made this a good title that expresses the uniqueness of the game."

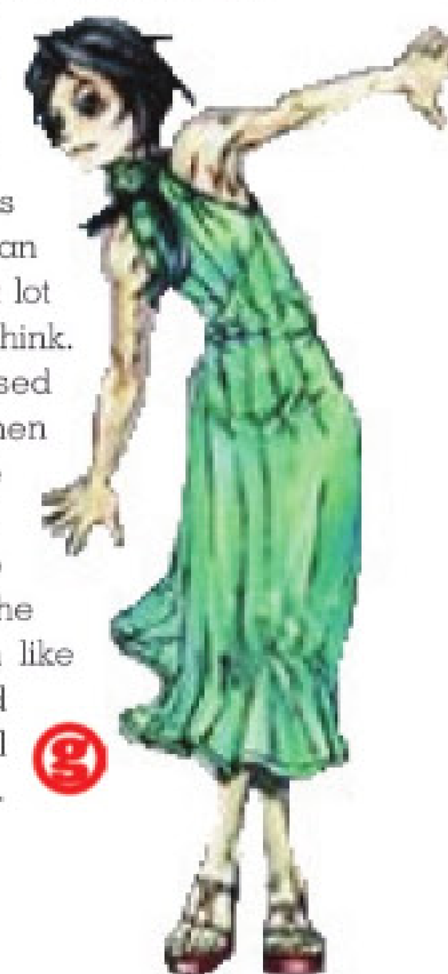


MASATO MAEGAWA
Producer

Many of Treasure's Nineties games were published by ESP Software, a rather unique company funded by a partnership between several independent developers, including Game Arts, Sting and even Treasure itself. But for the studio's N64 output, publishing duties were handled by platform holder Nintendo, which was happy to lend its own design expertise to Treasure during the production of *Sin & Punishment*. "They helped us in all kinds of ways, like helping us come up with names for the enemies, giving suggestions to help improve the playability when playing for the first time and sharing their thoughts on adjustments to the difficulty," Maegawa explains. Surprisingly, he also reveals that the Kyoto publisher was actively trying to make its games more accessible to a mainstream audience even then, six years before the Wii. "Their main requests were to make the game easier to play, adding a tutorial and adjusting the difficulty so that even players playing for the first time could understand the fun of shooting games."

A HARDCORE and challenging game when it was released in November of 2000, *Sin & Punishment* must have been crushingly difficult before Nintendo suggested its changes. Instead, it was actually one of the most enjoyable and satisfying action games released on the Nintendo 64, and was rightly hailed as one of the finest new experiences in the console's final months. Despite the fact that both the Dreamcast and PlayStation 2 had been released by then, the N64 had a fantastic year in 2000, with other swan songs like *Perfect Dark* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask* also released.

Unlike those games, however, *Sin & Punishment* was never afforded the privilege of a release outside Japan. It wasn't until 2007 that most gamers would have a fair chance to play *Sin & Punishment*, when it was finally released in the West via the Wii's Virtual Console service. Though two hardware generations old by then, the game still impressed with its outlandish gameplay and dynamic action, and proved so popular with Nintendo's current audience that Treasure was encouraged to produce a sequel. Released last year, the Wii exclusive evolved the concept forged in the first game's inception by expanding its unique independent movement and aiming across to the Wii Remote and Nunchuk. Which, as Maegawa reveals, is an idea that dates back a lot further than you may think. "We even discussed having a sensor when we were making the N64 game and so, as soon as I saw the Wii Remote, I felt that we had no choice but to make a sequel," he says, dropping his final revelation like a cheeky smart bomb. That would be Treasure's trademark 'original thinking' at work once again...



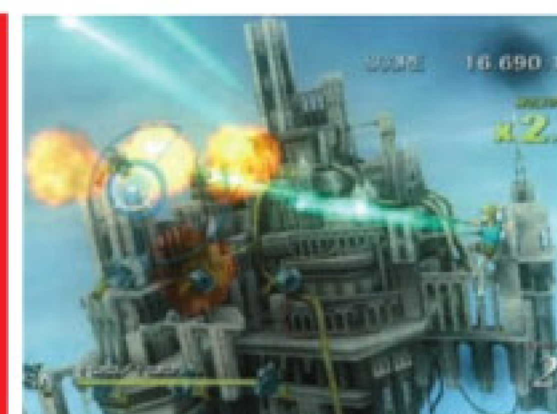
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Star Fox 64 defined the template for on-rails shooters on N64, but that was before *Sin & Punishment* took it to the next level.



The Wii Remote and Nunchuk seem made for *Sin & Punishment*, to the extent that a sequel was arguably an inevitability.

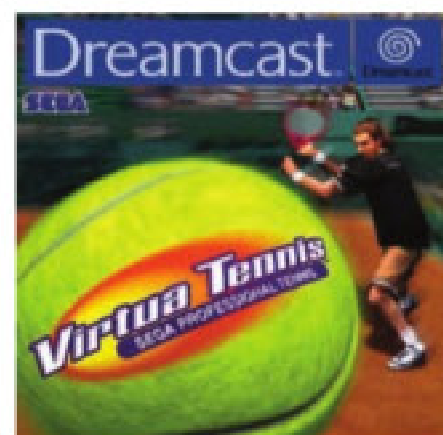




BEHIND THE SCENES

VIRTUA TENNIS

Most sports games come and go, their annual iterations rendering previous instalments fun but forgetable footnotes. But some stay in the memory forever and seem to age little over the years. How do you make a sports game that special? Sega's Mie Kumagai reveals all.



Released: 1999
Format: Arcade, Dreamcast
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sega AM3

KEY STAFF:
Mie Kumagai Producer
Katsumoto Tatsukawa Director
Mitsuharu Saikawa Chief Programmer
Kazuko Noguchi Chief Designer

TENNIS GAMES, WHETHER you like them or not, are at the very heart of the videogame medium. *Tennis For Two*, developed on an oscilloscope, is famously the first videogame ever made, dating all the way back to 1958. 1972's *Pong* thrust arcade gaming into the mainstream with its fun simplicity, and in 2006 Nintendo managed to place the Wii in millions of homes worldwide, thanks largely to the novelty of *Wii Sports* tennis.

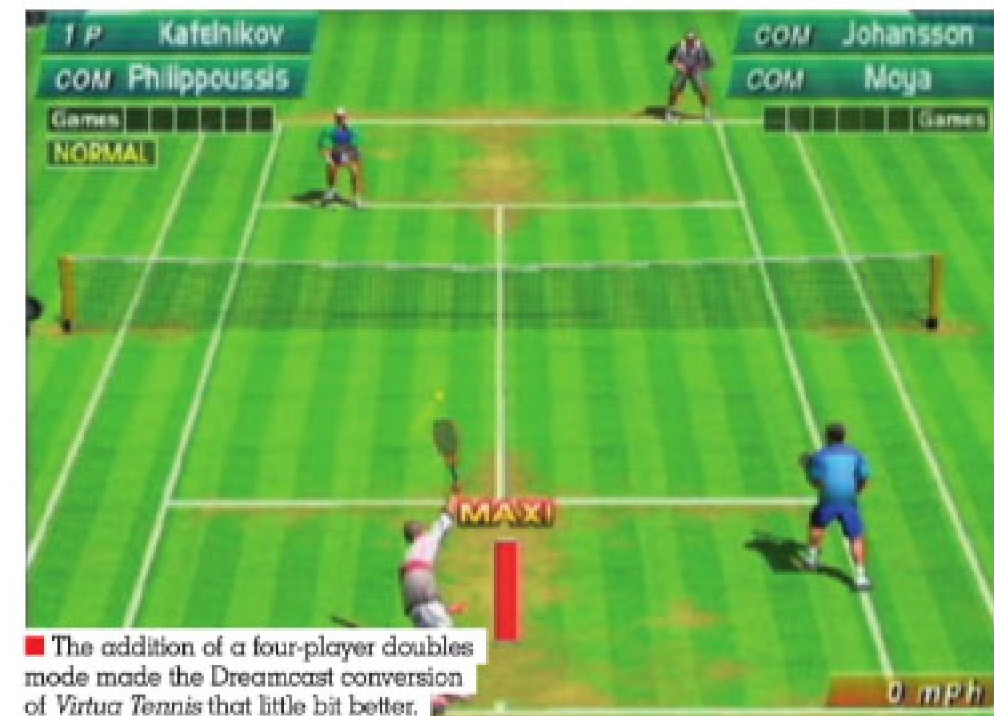
Sega's *Virtua Tennis*, developed for the arcade in 1999 and ported to Dreamcast in 2000, isn't quite as important to the history of games as the aforementioned three, but it might be the best loved and most playable. Striking a perfect balance between realistic simulation and arcade fun, it's a game you can start playing and enjoy with minimal effort, but also one that rewards extended play with a deepening of skill. Not just a great sports game, *Virtua Tennis* was a great videogame and rightly takes its place among the pantheon of timeless Dreamcast classics.

Yet despite being recognised as one of the greatest games of its type, *Virtua Tennis* was far from a sure thing when first in development at Sega. In fact, most of the company was dead against the original arcade game being developed, as Sega veteran Mie Kumagai tells us during her promotional tour for *Virtua Tennis 4*. "You know, internally within Sega, when we decided to make a tennis game, there was a lot of negativity where people were commenting that we wouldn't be able to make a great game within that concept.

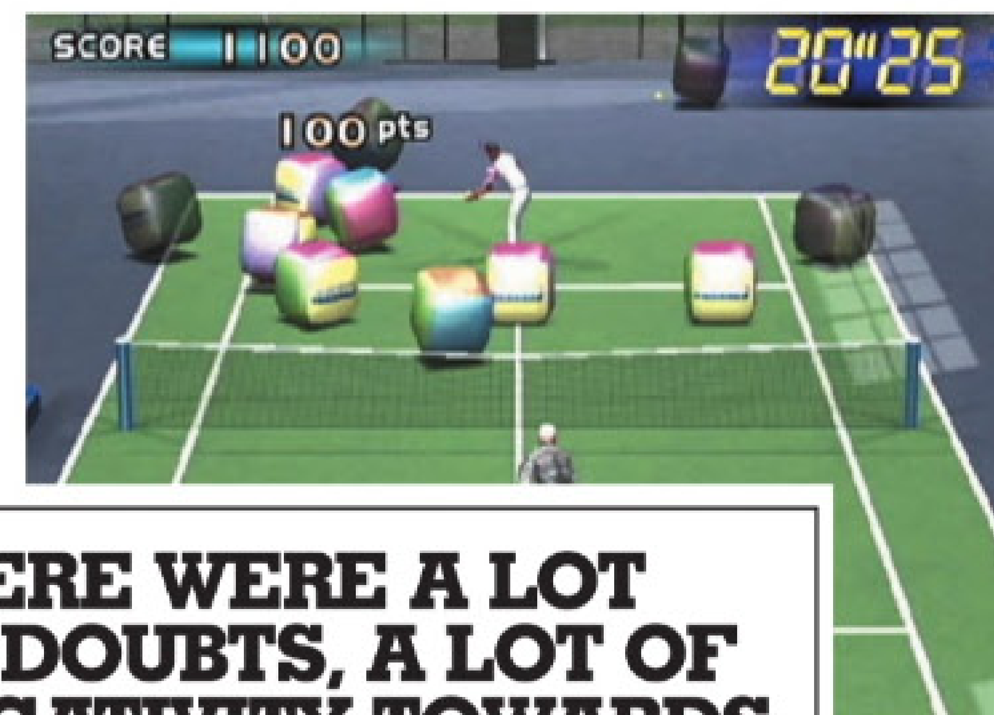
"There were a lot of doubts floating around, a lot of negativity towards the project when we started developing," she elaborates. CONTINUED >.

THERE WERE A LOT OF DOUBTS, A LOT OF NEGATIVITY TOWARDS THE PROJECT





The addition of a four-player doubles mode made the Dreamcast conversion of *Virtua Tennis* that little bit better.













Motion blur was all the rage around 2000. It didn't half make screenshots tricky to take though.



There have been loads of *VT* sequels now but the real brilliance of the game was always present in the original edition.







FROM THE FORUM

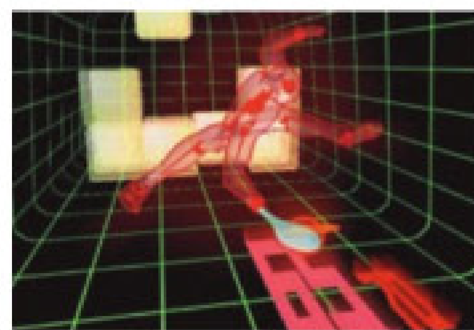
Posted by:
BIG MEAN BUNNY
"This is one of those superb games where the controls just seem perfect! Within minutes of your first game you will be knocking back and forth Sampras/Agassi-calibre rallies."

Posted by:
THEMILKMAN
"It's the only game ever that made me buy a console right there in the shop. I'd just got my student loan, and to be honest, I'd really gone off games what with being at uni and all so it was a bit of a surprise when I splashed out on it. Three games of it in HMV with my mate though and I was walking home with a Dreamcast under my arm. First time I've ever done that."

Posted by:
BOB SYKO
Me and my twin brother used to go into HMV most nights after school and play this since they had a Dreamcast and two pads set up. Back in the days when you weren't frowned at by staff for actually playing the games they have set up. One of the first games I bought when I got my Dreamcast for Christmas some time later when you could get them for £50 with five games. It was still great and I don't think I have played a tennis game I liked since."

Posted by:
ONEWILD
When I was at uni, one of my mates had a Dreamcast and one night he suggested playing *Virtua Tennis*. I had played it in the past but not for a long time but it turns out I'm pretty good at the game. We were playing winner stays on and about two hours later I still hadn't lost a game. They refused to play me at it ever again."

Power Cosmic



■ IF ATARI'S *BREAKOUT* was the spiritual sequel to *Pong* then what is the spiritual sequel to *Virtua Tennis*, given the huge debt that it owes to Atari's 1972 bat-and-ball game? The answer may well be 2001's *Cosmic Smash*. Not only does the arcade/ Dreamcast game share similarities to *Breakout*, in that it has you hitting balls against a wall to break the bricks within, but it also shares naming conventions with *VT*'s Japanese release, *Power Smash*, and uses a virtually identical control scheme. *Cosmic Smash* wasn't made by the same team as *VT*, it was developed by Sega Rosso, though that team did later merge with the *Virtua Tennis* group following Sega's internal restructuring in 2003.





■ Sega managed to license the likenesses of several high profile tennis players of the time, but curiously failed to get any of the real courts.

"I always felt that because people saw tennis as a kind of unexciting game – just two people hitting a ball back and forth – how were we going to make that an exciting game? That's what people were asking at the time."

For a long part of its development, *Virtua Tennis* was controlled in a very different way to the version we're all familiar with now. Instead of a joystick and buttons, it used a rotating paddle controller like the one used to play *Pong*. Strangely enough, as Kumagai explains it to us, it actually sounds a lot like the PlayStation Move and Kinect versions of *Virtua Tennis 4*, with movement handled automatically, leaving the player to just think about the swing of the racket, which was controlled with a left or right turn of the paddle depending on whether they wanted to perform a forehand or backhand.

"We were developing in that way for a while, but as time went on I got an opinion from Satoshi Mifune who was the director of *Virtua Striker*," explains Kumagai. "He came along and said, 'You know, I think this will work better with just a regular button and stick.' When I heard that, it pretty much demoralised me because I felt that we had to start all over again."

■■■ DESPITE THE SETBACK, Kumagai and the team went back to *Virtua Tennis* and re-designed the arcade cabinet and game to accommodate a more traditional control method before presenting a new working prototype within Sega. "We put it in the office and allowed people to come see it and have a go for themselves," she recalls. "Very, very quickly those negative feelings were gone. The tables were turned and it actually became one of the most supported internally developed titles at the time. It was building up a lot of hype, and, with lots of other very well established creators within the company at the time, I was very happy to receive positive feedback from those people as well. So in hindsight Mifune's advice was vital to receive, even if it was quite crushing to hear at first. That moment was the biggest challenge for us, but it also led to our biggest achievement, and it's the reason why *Virtua Tennis* is still here today."

The control method is only half the story with *Virtua Tennis*, however. The physical controls are really just a conduit for the game design to reach between game and player without obstruction, and it's the finely balanced gameplay that Kumagai most readily credits for the success of *Virtua Tennis*. "Within the studio we had a certain set of concepts and goals that we aimed for, and some were compromised or adjusted as the game evolved, but one thing we always tried to stick to is that we wanted to bring a tennis game in which the entry window was as big as possible and as open to as wide an audience as possible. We wanted a game with easy controls that would allow you to play a great game of tennis. So it was geared toward casual gamers in that respect, but also had a realistic feel with lots of replayability so you could play multiple times and get better each time. So it had that hardcore aspect too.

WE WANTED A GAME WITH EASY CONTROLS THAT ALLOWED YOU TO PLAY GREAT TENNIS

"Every time we make a *Virtua Tennis* game we have to make sure we retain both those elements. We don't want to lose the simple controls and easy-to-play side of things and go one hundred per cent simulation, and neither do we want to lose the replayability. If you lose either part it's no longer a *Virtua Tennis* game. So that's our core goal every time."

With a brilliantly playable yet simple core game in place, *Virtua Tennis*'s development had a fairly smooth ride ahead, and any further bumps in the road proved to be pretty minor from that point onward. One of these was the name of the finished game. "You probably know that the game is called *Power Smash* in Japan," says Kumagai, "but when we brought the first game over to America and Europe, people within Sega didn't take too well to the title." At this point, Kumagai adopts her best American executive voice and exclaims 'Power Smash?!' with a mock look of bewilderment across her face. "They didn't think that it would translate well to Western audiences at all; they didn't think that it really told people what kind of game it was. I received a lot of feedback from the West asking us to use an established brand, so we decided to go with the *Virtua* label from *Virtua Racing* and *Virtua Fighter*. So that's how the name *Virtua Tennis* was born."

WHAT THEY SAID...



An exceptional piece of programming that justifies the purchase of a Dreamcast, and will help Sega in the long battle ahead against Sony and the PlayStation 2.

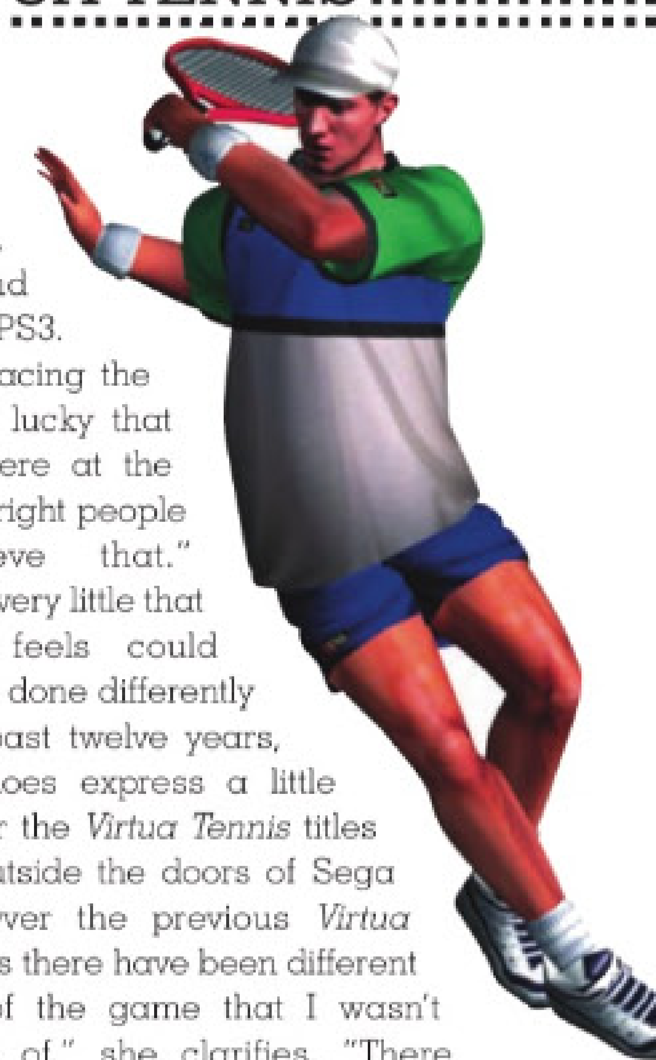
Dreamcast Magazine, Issue 12



MIE KUMAGAI
Producer

■■■ THE NEXT CHALLENGE, of course, was for *Virtua Tennis* to be ported over to the Dreamcast. More than just a vanilla conversion, this home edition added four-player support so that users could play a game of doubles, a world tour mode for extra longevity, and a string of silly and fun minigames that continued the trend started by the Crazy Box mode from *Crazy Taxi*. Yet despite such a well thought out and ambitious conversion, Kumagai brushes off any suggestion that the port may have proved difficult at all. "The Naomi board, that the *Virtua Tennis* arcade game ran on, and the Dreamcast were very technically similar, so I always had it in the back of my mind that we should make a Dreamcast version," she says. "In fact, because of that there were a number of things that we coded into the arcade game to make the upcoming conversion process even easier. It wasn't very difficult to port at all."

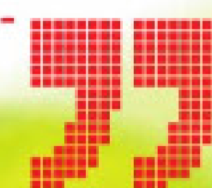
Over a decade later, Kumagai still works at Sega and is still in charge of *Virtua Tennis*, a series that is clearly very important to her. "*Virtua Tennis* is the most memorable title for me, it was massive," she says. "Regarding the series as a whole I'm very appreciative of *Virtua Tennis* and I'm very grateful for it, and for being able to head up the team over the past ten years or so. We've been blessed in a way by the technological advances every time we make a new *Virtua Tennis*, so that there's always something new that we can deliver to the players. We always strive to be as modern as possible with our technology, so with *4*, for example, we used 3D displays, Kinect and Move and full 1080p on 360 and PS3. So we're always embracing the latest tech, and I feel lucky that we've always been there at the right time and with the right people to achieve that."



There's very little that Kumagai feels could have been done differently over the past twelve years, but she does express a little regret over the *Virtua Tennis* titles created outside the doors of Sega Japan. "Over the previous *Virtua Tennis* titles there have been different versions of the game that I wasn't in charge of," she clarifies. "There were various opinions from people saying '*Virtua Tennis* is just a tennis game. Anyone can make one of those', and that's something I strongly disagree with." At this point, the Sega assistant who has been interpreting our conversation for the past twenty minutes surprises us by breaking away from simply translating and adds "I don't agree either". Feelings clearly run high for the series, even among those not directly responsible for creating it. "There have been lots of versions out on other platforms," Kumagai continues, "and I feel that, looking back, I could have done things differently and taken closer control over those. But overall I'm very grateful and very glad to have been a part of this franchise."



■ 3D games certainly age worse than 2D ones. *Virtua Tennis*'s players look much better on HD consoles.



>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Virtua Tennis took the brilliant simplicity of *Pong* and updated it for modern audiences, retaining the accessibility.



Top Spin's slightly more serious presentation has proven more popular in the Xbox age, but *Virtua Tennis* still has its fans.



COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to the rarest retro treasures



SHINING FORCE III: PREMIUM DISC

DETAILS
Format: Saturn
Year: 1998
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Camelot Software Planning
Expect to pay: £30-£100



EXHIBIT A: Unlike retail Saturn games, the Premium Disc comes in a cardboard sleeve rather than a jewel case. Try not to scuff it.



EXHIBIT B: Put the CD in a PC and you'll find a secret text document that criticises Sega's actions during the Saturn/Dreamcast era.

Why It's Rare

BECAUSE YOU couldn't buy it in shops, for one thing. No, if you wanted the elusive Premium Disc, you had to cut out vouchers from the manuals of all three separately released discs of *Shining Force III* and post them off to the developer, Camelot Software Planning. This made the disc quite difficult to come by, especially if you lived outside Japan. Although Camelot had quite a few discs in storage for many years after 1998, it soon became quite tricky to locate all three vouchers.

Most second-hand copies of the games already had their vouchers removed and the second disc of the trilogy is something of a rarity in itself, so you could end up spending in excess of £100 just to get all three tokens. In a rare act of generosity, Camelot Software Planning was happy to honour the Premium Disc offer to anyone outside Japan, if they sent the tokens in, and would occasionally send unsolicited discs out in response to fan mail.

As the years passed, however, the prospect of acquiring a new disc from the source has become very unlikely. If you want one to complete your collection now, your best bet is to try eBay or specialist retro stores, but be prepared to pay inflated prices.



If you'd like **games**™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner then email us at **retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk**

Worth Playing?

OH, YES. Packed full of special features, the Premium Disc includes exhaustive galleries of concept art, promotional imagery and 3D models, a sound test, interviews with the developers, and isolated movies. Best of all, however, it includes about six extra-difficult battles to play once you finished the main trilogy. These battles pitted you against famous bosses from the previous Mega Drive and Game Gear games but in three dimensions and with a custom team assembled from all of the characters you'd acquired during each chapter of the *Shining Force III* trilogy.

As a bonus disc and freebie, the *Shining Force III* Premium Disc is one of the most generous and comprehensive ever created in the history of videogames and it continues to impress us today that Camelot Software Planning would pour so much effort into producing something the company wouldn't even profit from. And despite its rarity and market value, the sheer wealth of content on the disc – playable or otherwise – makes it worth every penny for fans of the series. If you're a strategy RPG nut and you don't have this Saturn release then we suggest you start looking for it now.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Tom Davies**
Occupation: **Supermarket Assistant**

Why collect Shining Force games and what drew you to the Premium Disc in particular?
I played *Shining In The Darkness* briefly after borrowing it from a friend, which was technically my introduction to the series. Then, one month, while flicking through the pages of *Sega Pro*, I saw a review for *Shining Force II*. At the time, I'd never seen a game like it. *Shining Force* itself had completely passed me by, and I have since found out that it is likely that the island I live on had perhaps five copies of the original title in circulation. I fell in love with the style of combat, the characters, the simple story, the visuals, pretty much everything.

When I heard that Sega was releasing *Shining Force III* so late in the life of the Saturn, I rushed out to the same shop where I purchased *Shining Force II* and thoroughly enjoyed it right up until the cliffhanger ending. I'd heard stories of a disc of bonus materials for the game, including extra battles, that was available as a mail-order offer for owners of all three scenarios from Camelot, the game's developer.

Please tell us how/where you found the disc.
I was pointed in the direction of *Shining Force III*'s creator, Camelot. Apparently, at that time, despite its split from Sega, Camelot still had stock of the Premium Disc and would still honour the offer.

What condition was the disc in and how much did you pay for it?
Obviously the disc was in perfect condition. Technically I paid the price of all three scenarios (about £40 for Scenario 1, £50 for Scenario 2 and £55 for Scenario 3, as I recall) and ten international reply coupons (about £10).

Do you play the game? If so, what do you think of it?
Of course. It's the perfect thank you to fans. It gives you the chance to pick your team of 12 from the entire cast of playable characters across the three scenarios of *Shining Force III* that you recruited on your playthrough of the game proper, and face them off against several of the bosses from the series, which is great on its own, but the extra bonuses round it out very nicely.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the disc?
The disc in the photograph is going to be mine for life, the extra disc that Camelot sent me by mistake was another matter entirely…



Gaining acceptance and respect in the world of Japanese videogame production isn't easy, but unassuming ex-pats Dylan Cuthbert and Giles Goddard have done just that… and much, much more

THE PEOPLE OF Japan have a reputation for being insular. Despite their acceptance of aspects of Western culture, they regard their own products, traditions and population as superior. So the success of Dylan Cuthbert and Giles Goddard – two British programmers whose talents scored them significant roles within the most famous videogame company on the planet – is remarkable.

Both men got into the world of coding in a similar fashion. "My mum bought me a Sinclair Spectrum for Christmas when I was a wee lad," recalls Goddard. "It didn't come with any games and I didn't have any money so I used to type in BASIC games from magazines. None of them ever worked of course, so I always had to fix them by hand. One day it occurred to me that it'd be easier just programming them myself." Cuthbert was also introduced to programming via Sir Clive's hardware. "I learned to program when I was nine or ten on a ZX-81 loaned to me from a friend's dad who bought it to try and turn it into a drum machine because he was a synth nut," he says. "However, the ZX-81 doesn't have sound – a fact he neglected to check when he ordered it – so he gave it to me and I started typing in program listings of games from magazines."

THE PAIR BEGAN their careers in the UK at Argonaut Software, headed by Jez San, who founded the company while still in his teens. 1986 smash *Starglider* propelled the fledgling outfit into the gaming elite. "I left school before my A-Levels so had to find a job," replies Goddard, when asked how he got involved with Argonaut. "By this time I was coding demos for the Amiga and experimenting with 3D wire frame stuff. I really wanted to do filled polygons, but didn't have a clue how to render them. When *Starglider II* came out it was one of the first games to use filled polygons. It blew me away. A few months later I saw an advert for programmers at Argonaut." 3D gaming was coming of age thanks to the power of 16-bit home computers. "I applied for a job with my 2D games and got rejected," he says. "I went away and made a 3D demo on the Amiga and sent it in a month later. Jez phoned me up and gave me a job."

The first task both men faced was converting *Starglider II* to different formats. Goddard handled the Macintosh SE port while Cuthbert worked on the PC version. "It was a nightmare and I was in way over my head," admits Goddard. "I barely managed to finish it, mainly because there was no info on how to get to the low-level hardware needed by the rasteriser. This was pre-internet and the only lead I had was the 'Apple User's Club' somewhere in Aberdeen and they had no idea what I was talking about." Despite these issues, Cuthbert and Goddard have fond memories of working under San. "Jez was very hands-off, so it was quite pleasant and creative," says Cuthbert. "I just got on and did my thing with little interruption." Goddard agrees: "It was good fun when there were about six of us working in San's house in North London being paid to do stuff I was already doing as a hobby in my bedroom back home. It was the ideal job."

Argonaut's output was at the cutting edge of technology. "At one point I worked on the Konix Multisystem, a console that didn't see the light of day," recalls Cuthbert. "Then I was put on the Game Boy to see if I could make a 3D game on it." The project found fame in Japan but was never released in the West. "Argonaut made its own Game Boy development kit by hacking one to bits and plugging cables in here and there," recalls Cuthbert. "That's what I used at first. Jez approached Nintendo to show off the results: a 3D engine on the Game Boy." It was a bold move. Unlike their Western counterparts, Japanese gamers had yet to embrace 3D gaming, and approaching

APART FROM THE USUAL 'GAIJIN' STUFF, I WAS TREATED LIKE ANYONE ELSE

Nintendo – then the world's biggest game manufacturer – smacked of arrogance. Still, the project appealed to the Japanese giant and it snapped up the rights to Cuthbert's creation. "The 3D engine and game I had developed for Game Boy were going to be published by Mindscape, but Nintendo bought the rights," he explains. Originally entitled *Lunar Chase*, the game was renamed *X* at the behest of Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi. Although it didn't exactly set the sales charts alight, it clearly found an audience, because Japanese publication *Famitsu* recently recognised it as one of the most influential Game Boy titles of all time. "I'm not sure who it influenced, but it was definitely flattering," laughs Cuthbert. "I think it was an incredibly unique game for the time in Japan."

A groundbreaking game, *X* was the first 3D title released for a portable machine in the territory. Sadly, it never got the chance to repeat this success in the US or Europe, where, ironically, 3D was far CONTINUED >.



Giles Goddard was responsible for Mario's 3D floating head demo, arguably one of the most important in gaming history.



The Japan-only Game Boy title *X* in action. The first 3D game to be released on a portable, it was designed and programmed by Cuthbert.



Goddard and Cuthbert's first task at Argonaut was to convert the hit title *Starglider II* to different formats.

better established. "It was deemed unsuitable for the American market by the Nintendo of America execs at the time," says Cuthbert. "They wanted to keep everything simple and *Tetris*-like."

X paved the way for future collaboration between Argonaut and Nintendo. San's company designed a graphics chip – the Super FX chip – that could be placed inside SNES cartridges to boost 3D performance. The first to exploit this hardware was *StarFox*, one of the console's best-loved games. "Giles and I were the main programmers," recalls Cuthbert. "We worked on location at Nintendo the entire time. The whole game was our domain and we worked closely with [Shigeru] Miyamoto, [Katsuya] Eguchi, and everyone else. A lot of the ideas came from us. The storyline and characters were totally Nintendo's doing, but I did come up with the names for Fox McCloud, Slippy and Peppy. Falco was thought up by character designer Takaya Imamura." *StarFox* was a hit and led to further work for the intrepid duo. Soon after, Goddard oversaw the development of *Stunt Race FX* (*Wild Trax* in Japan), while Cuthbert busied himself with *StarFox's* sequel. Sadly, despite being practically finished, *StarFox 2* never saw official release. "PlayStation had just come out as we were finishing things off and it overshadowed everything – especially the Super FX chip – and this was the main reason for stopping the release," explains Cuthbert. "It was a shame but definitely the right decision. SNES was looking older and older thanks to the release of the Saturn and PlayStation."



DYLAN CUTHBERT
Q Games

FOR CUTHBERT, THE appeal of 32-bit hardware was strong. "I moved on to Sony America because I wanted to work on PlayStation," he says. "I was in awe of *Ridge Racer* as I was a big arcade-game fanatic back then and the number of polygons the system was pushing was phenomenal." However, his former cohort decided to stay with Nintendo, albeit on a more permanent basis. "I'd been in Japan for over two years and had very little connection to the UK so I didn't want to go back," Goddard says. Contrary to popular opinion, finding acceptance as a Westerner within a Japanese firm wasn't an issue for Goddard. "Apart from the usual 'gaijin' stuff, I was treated like anyone else," he insists. "By the time I joined Nintendo I'd already proved myself with the two Super FX titles. Also, a lot of Japanese business is done through 'shoukai': being introduced to another company by a company you're already doing business with." Argonaut's previous positive dealings with Nintendo meant Goddard's route in was relatively painless.

"In between projects, I was in the Nintendo EAD tech group so we did lots of things that never saw the light of day," Goddard recalls. "One demo I worked on depicted Link fighting an enemy. It was used as a *Zelda* promo at the Shoshinkai show one year." Goddard was also behind one of the most important technical demos – the 3D Mario face that did so much to prove the raw power of N64. "It started off as a low-cost motion-capture experiment," he says. "I had fluorescent ping pong balls attached to my face one day when Miyamoto walked past wondering what I was up to. He liked the way you could pull the balls around to make funny faces and wanted to know if I could make it look more rubbery."

Next was *1080 Snowboarding*, which revolutionised the genre with its accurate physics and rewarding gameplay. "It started off as a skiing game that used Inverse Kinematics instead of animation for the player character," reveals Goddard. "We realised that snowboarding is interesting because of the tricks you can do. It was also quite a new sport so everyone was doing it. The Inverse Kinematics also proved too hard to control so I only used it blended with other animations." At that time, Cuthbert – who was firmly established at Sony America – produced 3D action title *Blasto* and went on to be instrumental in prepping the world for PlayStation's successor. "I made two or three of the early PS2 tech demos, such as the duck in the bath," he says. "It was rendering curved surfaces in real time."

AFTER GAINING VALUABLE experience during their careers, Cuthbert and Goddard both decided they needed a fresh challenge and set up individual game studios – both on Japanese soil. Cuthbert founded Q-Games in 2001 after growing disillusioned with his Sony-based surroundings. "I got tired of the rat-race inside corporations like Sony. Even though it was a fairly relaxed environment, I could never be as creative as I wanted to be," he explains. "Also I missed Japan – I'd just married a girl from Kyoto and wanted to move back." Q-Games has been involved with many high-profile projects, but one stands out. "Nintendo contacted me to see if I wanted to do *StarFox Command* on DS," he explains. "Imamura, the original artist from *StarFox*, came and worked very closely with us and we followed Miyamoto's ideas for what he wanted to see in a DS version of *StarFox*. It was fun working with the two of them again."

Nintendo isn't the only firm with which Cuthbert remains on friendly terms. "We started our own brand called *PixelJunk* almost two years ago and are developing full-HD 2D games for PSN," he says. "Our *PixelJunk* games come directly from our creative side, with an emphasis on innovation. Not all the games are for everyone, but everyone should find something that tickles them."

Goddard's studio Vitei also maintains a bond with Nintendo. "After leaving and doing freelance for a while I was quite eager to get a team together again," he says. The studio produced DS title *Theta*, which wasn't released outside Japan. "It started as one of our DS control experiments," Goddard explains. "We were trying out various ideas that required two screens and touch input. I like working on things that are unique to the hardware. The main reason it wasn't released outside Japan was cost." As for Vitei, the studio recently completed *Steel Diver* for 3DS and is keen to promote its little known rock climbing sim. "*Rock 'N' Roll Climber* is a title we did that uses the Balance Board to control your legs," says Goddard. "Like *Theta*, the aim is to use the hardware in a way that people hadn't tried before."



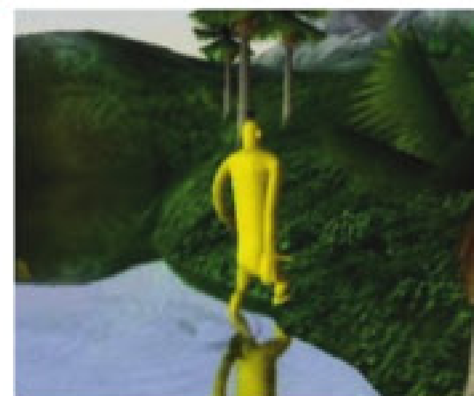
GILES GODDARD
Vitei Studios

Cuthbert and Goddard's story is amazing. For two Western programmers to scale the heights of Japanese game development and then establish their own studios in Japan is almost inconceivable. "I'm not sure if pride is the right word," replies Cuthbert when asked how he feels about his achievement. "I simply enjoy what I do and it's great being able to work with a company like Nintendo who also enjoy what they do and follow the same principles we follow when we make a game, primarily because I make games in the way I learned during my time at Nintendo." Goddard's reply is more succinct. "I'm proud of the games I've worked on," he says with a smile.

MIYAMOTO WONDERED WHAT I WAS UP TO WHEN I HAD PING PONG BALLS ATTACHED TO MY FACE

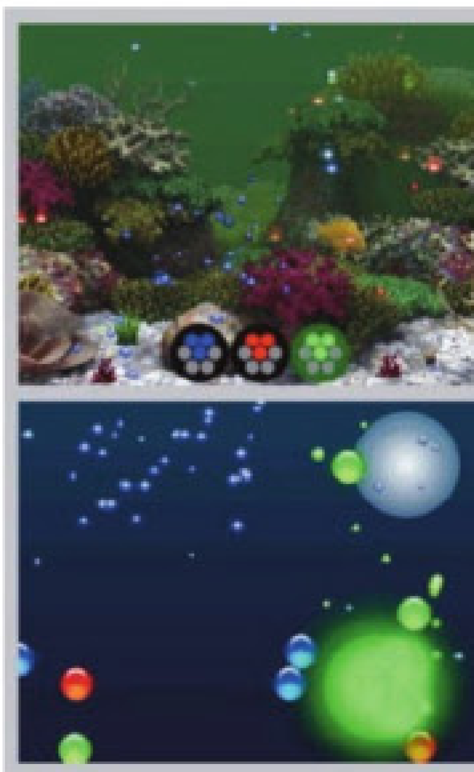


Q-Games' *PixelJunk* series has been a massive global success.



DOSHIN THE GIANT (64DD/GC)

"NINTENDO ASKED me if I could help with this project they had going with another company in Tokyo. Basically they'd lost their programmer," recalls Goddard when asked about how he became involved with *Doshin The Giant*. "I didn't have anything planned for a couple of months so accepted the job and started programming it from scratch, as it's generally quicker and easier that way." An intriguing take on the God-sim genre, the game was originally bundled with the 64DD add-on before being upgraded for release on GameCube.



Vitei's intriguing DS title *Theta* in action.

STARFOX (SNES)

Putting the Super FX chip to use

THE FIRST GAME to utilise Argonaut's innovative Super FX chip, *StarFox* (or *Starwing* to use the European title) introduced many SNES gamers to the wacky world of 3D visuals. Both Cuthbert and Goddard were involved with its production and were relocated – along with other members of Argonaut's team – to Nintendo's Kyoto HQ so that they could work as closely with Shigeru Miyamoto and Katsuya Eguchi as possible.



StarFox 2 (SNES) unreleased

And we thought it would never see the light of day…

STARFOX WAS such a success that a sequel was almost unavoidable, and Cuthbert worked alongside Nintendo EAD to produce what would have been a worthy successor. However, the game was never officially released because Nintendo was reluctant to put it up against the three-dimensional might of Sony and Sega's new 32-bit machines. Thankfully, the ROM has recently been released on the internet so it's now possible to experience this lost gem.



BEST BOSS

Ghouls 'N Ghosts Arcade [Capcom] 1988

SAY HELLO to Shielder, the gruesome end-of-level boss from the first stage of *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*. Using his head, literally, he'll chase Sir Arthur along the stormy castle forecourt spitting fireballs straight at him. He's actually quite easy to beat, but after you've run and jumped through the seven levels of hell that is the whole first level, you'll be glad of the simplicity and just be happy to soak up the spectacle of the battle. As a first boss it's a fantastic way to open up one of the greatest, and hardest, arcade games of all time and the perfect way to kick off our new Best Boss feature.



ELITE: THE LEGACY

It's the godfather of open-world videogames, the title many look back on as the best game ever made. But what effect did it have on the creators David Braben and Ian Bell – and how did it shape other developers' lives? **games™** finds out…

DAVID BRABEN AND Ian Bell are geeks. They spent a large chunk of their university time producing a wire-frame 3D game. They used their intelligence to gain degrees at Cambridge University. They are boffins. They are brainboxes. They are spods. And they are also two of the most important developers British gaming has ever produced. Gaming gods. Geniuses. Good guys.

And, of course, they are not really geeks. That is the term which gamers have unfairly been tagged with for quite some time. In many other walks of entertainment life, Braben and Bell would have become mainstream celebrities. They would have appeared on *Wogan*, on *Jonathan Ross*, on *Graham Norton*. Their skill and intellect would have been recognised.

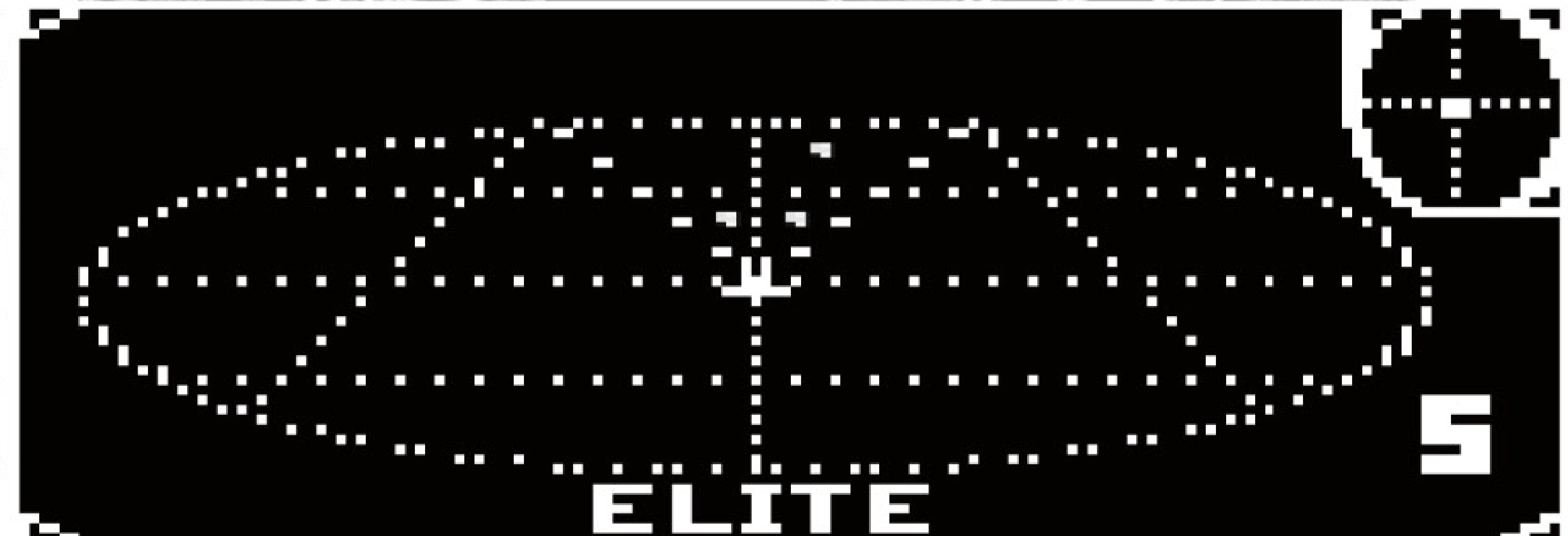
But here we are 25 years on and where is the mass media attention? *Star Wars* was thrown a worldwide party for its 21st anniversary, but *Elite* is overlooked. Yet just as Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader shook up cinema, the space trading exploration game *Elite* was utterly groundbreaking. In 1984, Braben and Bell did what many felt was impossible. They took gaming into the third dimension and created a truly compelling masterpiece.

"OVER THE YEARS I've had a lot of contact with people, conversations ranging from 'you cost me two grades at A-level' to 'I went into computer graphics because of *Elite*'," laughs Ian Bell, who appeared at Nottingham's GameCity for a celebration of the game's 25th anniversary. "And what that has brought home to me is the effect and responsibility of games, particularly for children. You're reaching into the minds and the imaginary spaces of children and you are, to an extent, shaping their characters and their life stories. And that's a sacred and profound responsibility and it wasn't something that I was considering at the time we did *Elite*."

Bell and Braben have had a lot of time to reflect on *Elite*. As have a lot of players and developers. The game shaped many people's lives – "*Elite* was the game that really got me hooked on gaming," says **games™** forum poster Gloridel. "It was the first game I had ever played that was more that something you just picked up, played for ten minutes then threw away" – and it continues to influence games today. It may be pushing it to say that, in *Elite*'s absence, we would not today be enjoying a wealth of 3D classic series such as *Call Of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*. But when you consider *GTA*'s producer dubbed the game '*Elite* in the City' and that titles like *Eve Online* take obvious influence from the 1980s gem, then you can fairly assume that Braben and Bell's 22K of code was no flash in the pan. Gaming at that point was nowt but a baby. Suddenly it was graduating to high school.

WE WERE THERE AT THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME… I THINK WE WERE VERY LUCKY

"We were there at the right place at the right time," says Braben, modestly. "I think we were very lucky and I'm extremely grateful for that." But luck doesn't tell the full story. Sheer hard graft does. Braben and Bell were two Cambridge University students producing a game on the BBC Micro, Braben juggling his Natural Sciences degree with programming and Bell trying to




Originally printed in *Zzap!64*, this photograph shows David Braben and Ian Bell with their groundbreaking game.

STORMY START

Things didn't always run smoothly for David Braben and Ian Bell. After they finished their game, they sought a publisher to get it into the hands of the gaming masses and ensure a few bob reached their pockets. They initially approached Thorn EMI. "And we were starry-eyed because they seemed like the shiny image of the film industry and there we were, two guys who had come from producing on a hobby machine," says Braben. The executives at Thorn EMI did not look favourably on the game, however. "They wanted it to be played in ten minutes, with a score and three lives and I was crestfallen," says Braben. "In the back of my mind, I thought, 'Oh God, what if they're right?'. All of the things I thought were great about *Elite*, they didn't like." The execs were unsure if people would spend weeks on one game, having become accustomed to the more casual gameplay of the arcades. So the game was taken to Acornsoft. "They were a bunch of great people and we should be forever grateful. They were right behind it heart and soul," Braben recalls.

ELITE SOLD MORE THAN ONE FOR EVERY BBC MICRO, WHICH IS A BIZARRE STAT

fit in coding as he aimed for a first in Mathematics. They finished the game before they had graduated. It was a period of bloody hard work, of that there is no question.

"Every time I look back it seems as if we have come so far so quickly," continues Braben. "I remember at the time that a lot of games which were doing well – such as *Galaxian* and *Defender* – were mostly 2D, and 3D wasn't seen to be possible. But 3D was the opportunity Ian and I stumbled on."

Elite was striking for all the right reasons. The wire-frame 3D graphics, the open-ended gaming model and the advanced game engine combined to produce a highly influential piece of work. *Beebug Magazine*, a specialist publication for the Acorn computer, loved it. Reviewer David Fell summed up: "*Elite* is undoubtedly a masterpiece of programming that I would recommend to anyone who has a Beeb." He said he was "convinced that Acornsoft have just released the best game ever for the Beeb."

"*Elite* was slightly before my time because I was only five when it came out," recalls Chris Delay, creative director of Introversion which, until recently, referred to itself as the last of the bedroom programmers. "But I will always remember playing the Amiga sequel *Frontier* and I was hooked for weeks. I have now played *Elite* in retrospect and what both games showed was that a game world can be open and players can write their own stories within those worlds. *Elite* gave us an incredible glimpse at what was possible in videogames."

Braben and Bell were understandably chuffed with the game and its reception at the time. They began to attract attention from other developers and soon the influence of *Elite* spread. "The first time I met David Braben, he was standing proudly beside *Elite*," says *Earthworm Jim* creator David Perry. "I must admit I was a total fanboy. As a fellow programmer, what he had accomplished was truly groundbreaking.

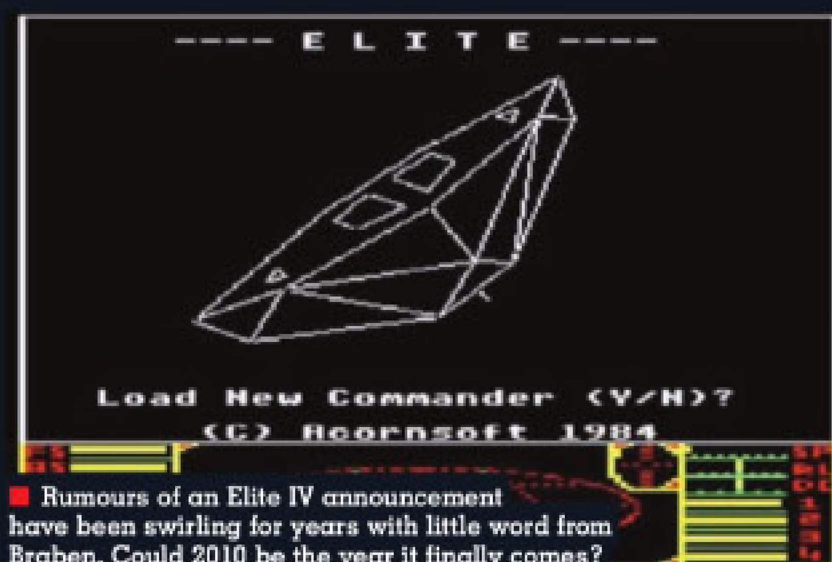
He turned out to be a really nice guy too, and is a shining example of the difference between having a job in the game industry and having a career in the game industry. We can never have enough people like him."

THE GAME'S INFLUENCE infiltrated British programming. "I admire *Elite* enormously as a groundbreaking title," says Revolution Software boss Charles Cecil. Although it didn't have a major effect in some corners of the globe. "I had never heard of *Elite* before I met David and Ian [at GameCity in Nottingham this year]," says *Nobi Nobi Boy* creator Keita Takahashi.

Granted, it wasn't to everybody's tastes – "To be honest I didn't really like *Elite*," says Paul Carruthers, who had been producing games since 1987 when he created *Xor*. "It was too sprawling and epic for my liking" – but even the detractors saw its strengths. "*Elite* opened up the BBC as a viable games platform in a way no other game did," Carruthers adds. "Our first game was on the BBC and I'm not sure we would have been able to get it published if not for *Elite* having gone before."

But what were Braben and Bell – who say they were influenced by the *Traveller* RPG as well as *Star Wars*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* – trying to achieve? "It was an artistic statement really, doing the best we could on the platform without letting the commercial considerations compromise what we thought was the best product we could make in terms of a really good game that we wanted to play that was showing the potential of the medium," says Bell.

Acornsoft went all out with the release of *Elite*. The publisher's print run of the game exceeded



Rumours of an Elite IV announcement have been swirling for years with little word from Braben. Could 2010 be the year it finally comes?





25 years on and it hasn't aged a single bit. Just kidding.



David and Ian eventually went their seperate ways. The former runs Frontier Developments while the latter is the head of Slightly Mad Studios.

that of its previous highest selling games by a factor of two. "Because we worked many hours to make the game great, Acornsoft also stuck their neck out," says Braben. "*Elite* sold more than one for every BBC Micro, which was not only shocking but a bizarre stat."

He explains that sales figures for the BBC Micro were split, with machines sold for home use and those used in schools separately accounted for. It turned out that many children were buying copies of *Elite* to play at school and the fact that teachers

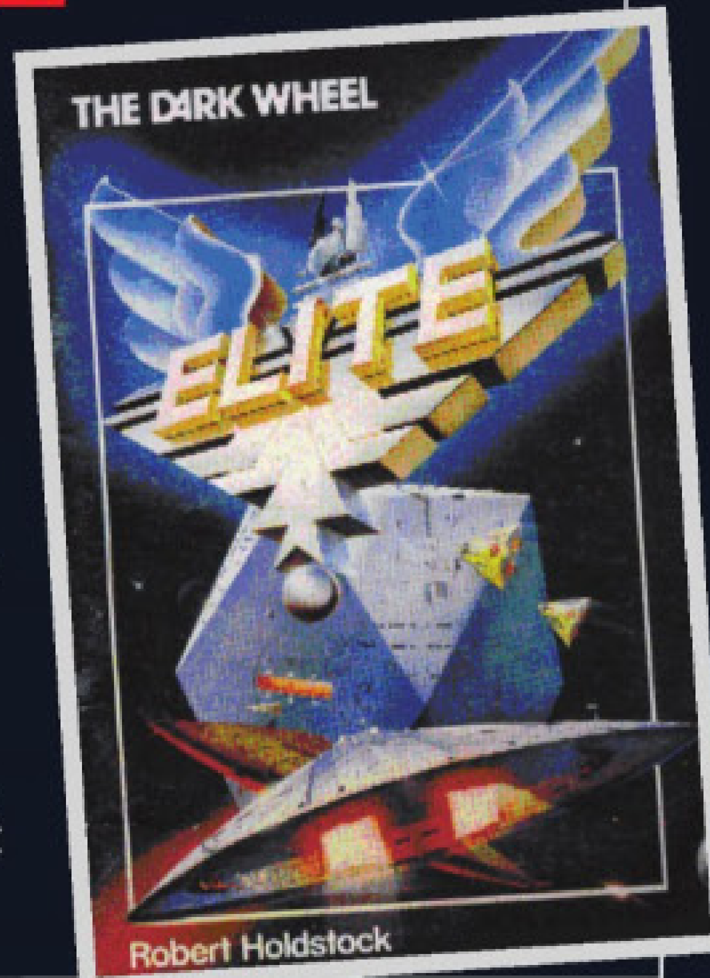


Later conversions of Elite featured flat shaded, coloured polygons. The height of graphical sophistication at their time.



The Dark Well

ONE PERSON WHO was successfully connected to *Elite* was author Robert Holdstock who wrote a novella, *The Dark Wheel*, which was included with the game. He recalls, "A fellow author had approached me to say David and Ian wanted a novella to go with *Elite* and since I basically didn't have anything else to do, I went down to Cambridge and saw it as a great opportunity to get back into science fiction." He remembers the moment the authors fired up the game for him to have a go. "The game was very exciting and fast, although I couldn't play it and I got blown up immediately. But it was wonderful to use my imagination, their planets and my characters to tell a rip-roaring yarn and it was a real pleasure to do. In the end, I guess I wrote the story, but I could never play the game."



were fine with them doing so – how many youngsters also played *Chuckie Egg*? – is one of the differences between school today compared with 25 years ago.

"The BBC brought people to computing," recalls Braben. "Nowadays, words like 'geek' are off-putting for people wanting to get in to technology. But it's a very creative medium – if you associated geeks with paint and video cameras, it would impede people from getting into art and film-making, that's for sure. That's what I want to move away from. Back then, computers were fashionable, which is the shocking thing. Looking back now it doesn't seem possible."

Elite was not only confined to the BBC. It was ported to many other machines, including the Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST and Amiga. Peter Molyneux pitched for the Spectrum port but he didn't get it.

BELL SAYS THAT, in the time that has passed, he has come to reflect on *Elite* and its impact. "It's not about creating technological achievements or making a lot of money," he says. "Now those are nice, but it's more abut how you can shape essentially the history and art of our species." He refers to George Orwell's *1984* – "a book that isn't read as much as it should be" – and talks of how the media is all about consumption rather than a means of educating and informing. He says he is glad *Elite* wasn't a first-person shooter and that it was about "making people think in different ways, making them look at things in different ways, making them spot new ways of getting into them."

He adds: "We are now working uphill in terms of educating people and changing paradigms, but that's really what matters and that's what *Elite* means to me now. *Elite* had an effect on a lot of people at a particular age and particular time in history. It's a real privilege and an honour and I'm lucky to have had that opportunity."





A drawing of The Gnat from January 1985.

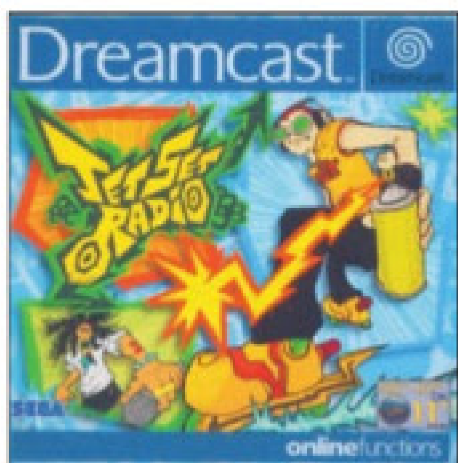

A sketch of the *Elite* screen, more of which can be found at www.iancgbell.clara.net/elite/



BEHIND THE SCENES

JET SET RADIO

Over ten years after it rolled onto the scene, Jet Set Radio is fondly remembered, yet rarely copied. What enabled the development team to create one of the most memorable games of the Dreamcast era?



Released: 2000
Format: Dreamcast
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Smilebit

KEY STAFF:
Masayoshi Kikuchi Director
Ryuta Ueda Art Director
Osamu Sato Producer
Hideki Naganuma Composer

TEN YEARS CAN be a long time. Ten years was enough time for Sega launch the Dreamcast, only to see it die a premature death and retire from manufacturing hardware altogether, and ten years was long enough to enshrine a select group of those Dreamcast games as timeless classics. But ten years can also be a short time. For those who remember it, *Jet Set Radio* was so hip, so innovative, and has barely been copied or rivalled since, that it's easy to look back a decade and think, 'Wow, was that really ten years ago? It seems like it was only yesterday.'

It was over a decade ago that Masayoshi Kikuchi led a small team of less than 25 people, with an average age of under 25, in the creation of what would become one of the Dreamcast's many classics. Kikuchi, along with *JSR* art director Ryuta Ueda, had just finished making *Panzer Dragoon Saga* for the Saturn before he got to work on *JSR*. After such a hardcore fantasy title, the team was eager to try its hand at something new. After all, dragons had been done before *Panzer Dragoon*, and they would be done after. "We wanted to work on something that was completely unlike *Panzer Dragoon Saga*. Something dealing with pop culture and something that was cool," says Kikuchi.

"Games like *Panzer* are really for hardcore gaming types. At the time, there weren't any games that had pop culture in them," Ueda adds. Ryuta Ueda had been drawing characters that resembled the end-look of *JSR* since his days in art school, as Kikuchi explains. "Ueda came and showed me this picture saying, 'Let's do this, let's do something like this.'" So the young team wasn't brought into a creative atmosphere; they created it themselves and resolved to make a game like none that had come before.

"We were a young team, with little experience. There was no one to tell us what was good or bad. We went off and did what we wanted CONTINUED >.

> WE WERE A YOUNG TEAM, WITH LITTLE EXPERIENCE; WE DID WHAT WE WANTED









Sega renewed its US trademark on the *Jet Set Radio* license in 2009, prompting speculation from fans of a new instalment.



US release *Jet Grind Radio* enabled users to share graffiti tags over SegaNet.

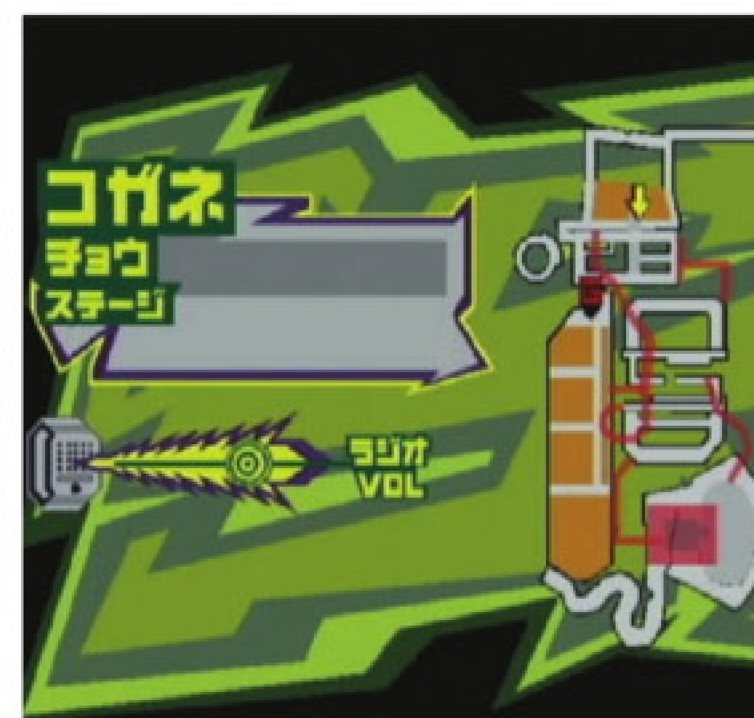








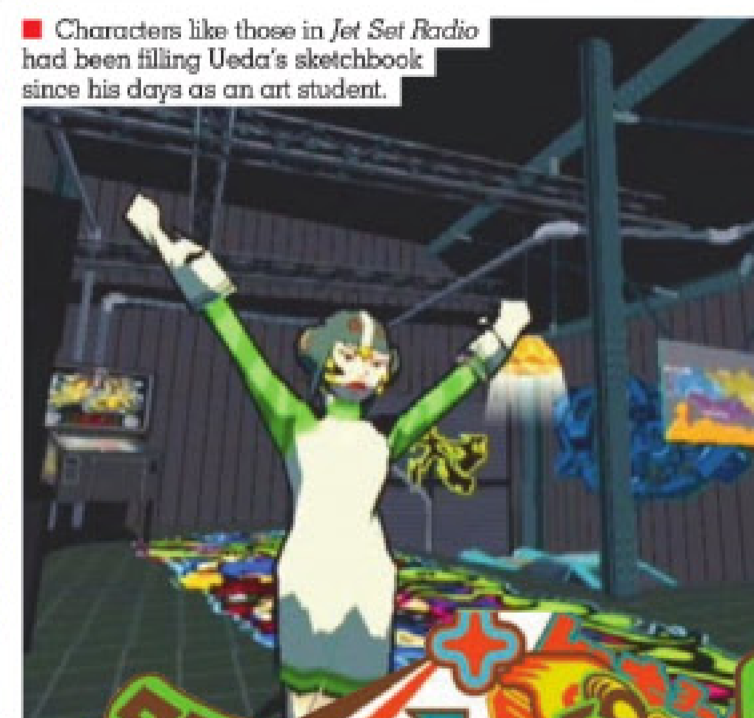




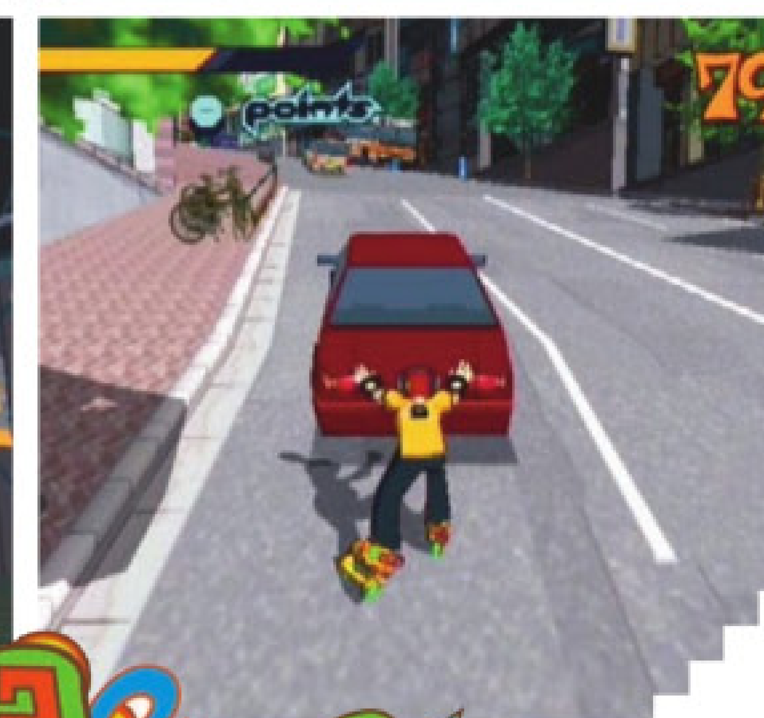








Characters like those in *Jet Set Radio* had been filling Ueda's sketchbook since his days as an art student.





FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: SHADOWMAN
Jet Set Radio was a game that I initially had no interest in, so my brother got it instead. I borrowed it off him one day when he was at football, to see what the fuss was about, and to this day I still haven't given it back! I love the slick and stylish graphics (which at the time I hadn't seen anything quite like), the fantastic soundtrack and, of course, the insanely addictive gameplay – especially when aiming for the highest ranks.

Posted by: MR MARVELLOUS
I remember paying £70 for it on import; it was worth every penny. One of, if not *the* best Dreamcast games. Let's hope it's part of Sega's XBLA plans.

Posted by: DIFFERENTCLASS
Right, in this game you can grind on a rail 50 feet in the air at high speed, leap another 10 feet in the air doing a 540-degree spin, also while spraying your tag on the cockpit window of a helicopter containing 'the man', and land on another stretch of rail while said chopper crashes into a billboard. All to that soundtrack. Love it.

Posted by: THE INQUISITOR
While the pioneering cel-shaded graphics and suitably diverse soundtrack were revolutionary at the time (and still great), I'd like to point out a much forgotten feature which I had never experienced on a console before. You could design your own graffiti art to use in-game, and then upload your design online and, in turn, download other aspiring artists' work, to use when making the streets more colourful. It added to the feeling of an underground community spirit that the game had running through its veins.



WHAT THEY SAID...



It's always nice when a title appears that's new, fresh and exciting. Like lots of other Sega games before it, Jet Set Radio is one of those games. There really is nothing else like it

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to do." That's not to say that the team operated without inspiration. It drew on other games that aspired to escape the confines of the fantasy/sci-fi offerings of the time, and thrived on competition from others who were trying to do the same. Ueda describes his experience at Tokyo Game Show 1996: "When I saw *PaRappa The Rapper* at TGS... I think that's the first game with pop culture like that. They did it first. After that I decided to make a true game, not just a visual experience, that was actually for adults."

If *Jet Set Radio* was such an original experience, where did the idea come from? Ueda and Kikuchi wanted to make a game for adults, but how did anyone even know what that meant at the start of the Dreamcast era? Ueda's art, which looks very similar to the Japanese package art, was the start, and Kikuchi says he developed the atmosphere of the game based on that. They both shared the image of a punky kind of character with headphones, sliding in and out between people on rollerblades in a crowded town. The anti-establishment themes of *Fight Club*, recently released in cinemas at the time, proved to be a large influence as well.

WHEN ALL WAS said and done, the team had a collection of ideas and concepts. The final idea was to produce a game that combined pop culture, street culture, Ueda's art, graffiti, punks, *Fight Club* and an open world. However, once they had a starting point, they faced another issue: how to take vague concepts and art and make a game out of them.

"We knew from the start we wanted to make an action game, but we wanted to make a kind of action game that had never been seen before," says Kikuchi. It seems that since *JSR* was different from everything that came before; once the core concepts were integrated into the art or gameplay, they didn't change. From concept to final product, *Jet Set Radio* was a game of a single and unchanging vision.

The fact that things didn't change doesn't mean that development was an easy process. "I don't remember the bad stuff," says Ueda when we ask him about the challenges the team faced during the game's remarkably short ten-month development cycle. The most challenging concept to bring to fruition on the Dreamcast is one that gamers take for granted now – the open world of the game. At the time, the phrase 'open-world game' didn't even exist but, according to Ueda, "It was one of the first games with a town you could play in." He acknowledges that *Super Mario 64* was the first truly open world, but claims that *Shenmue* was different because the player couldn't jump. "Making an entire town in a game was quite the prospect. It's not hard with modern hi-spec hardware, but that wasn't the case back then... It was very difficult from a programming standpoint," Kikuchi explains.

The challenges went beyond the technical. Integrating Kikuchi's gameplay vision with the open world also created issues with control. "As the characters' speed picked up, control became more difficult because it wasn't like Sonic, who can go in a straight line. The game world was an actual town, not a box, so there were lots of objects lying around for the player to crash into. Those obstacles made going fast stressful, not fun." The sense of speed was incredibly important because, until that point, there hadn't yet been a 3D action game that demanded speed. It was going to be a major selling point of the game.

WITH THESE CHARACTERS AND THIS ART, WE HAD TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Skating fast in an empty box is boring, but objects in the world make it frustrating. It sounds like an insurmountable challenge, but Kikuchi says the final decision was to use grinding to blend obstacle-free speed with the object-filled world. While grinding, players could enjoy an almost Sonic-like velocity, but they still had to worry about the game world around them when they jumped off the rail.



Perhaps the most memorable aspect of *Jet Set Radio* was its pioneering cel-shaded art style. While cartoon stylings would eventually become as ubiquitous as Photoshop lens flares, at the time the team wasn't even sure they could pull the trick off. "With these characters and this art, we had to do something different," says Ueda, explaining that the team's eventual decision to cel-shade the game wasn't a forgone conclusion, they just knew the game couldn't look like anything else on the market. "We couldn't do polygons that looked like his art," explains Kikuchi. While they knew how to make images that looked like Ueda's drawings with the kind of powerful computers used for CG rendering, they weren't sure it was possible on the comparatively weak Dreamcast hardware. "Cel-shading was a result of thinking hard about how to make Ueda's art come alive with polygons. We needed shading without gradations."





MASAYOSHI KIKUCHI
Director

THE CEL ART combined with Ueda's style to give the game a unique and very Japanese look. But Sega was worried that this unique art style and gameplay might alienate players outside of Japan, and decided that a few changes had to be made in order to make the game more palatable to a Western audience. The most obvious change was implemented only for the United States. The familiar name *Jet Set Radio* was inexplicably changed to *Jet Grind Radio*. Neither being English speakers, Ueda and Kikuchi couldn't explain the change. Maybe the US PR team wanted to emphasise the grind mechanic. Whatever the reason, the series name was unified once the Xbox sequel *Jet Set Radio Future* came out.

Europe didn't escape changes, either. While the name stayed intact, several changes were made to the game itself. Kikuchi said that the town in which the game takes place was very Japanese, and indeed it is. Playing the game immediately brings to mind the Tokyo fashion and shopping Mecca of Shibuya, a place that any Japanese player would instantly be familiar with, just as any British gamer would be familiar with Piccadilly Circus. In an attempt to help give non-Japanese players that same sense of familiarity, Kikuchi and his team added American-style environments modelled after New York's Times Square and the south Bronx. They also made small changes to the story, like changing the nationality of two of the characters to American.

These additional levels also created a marketing opportunity for Sega at home. The company was able to repackage *JSR*, complete with new levels, and sell the game to the Japanese audience again as *De La Jet Set Radio*. The most notable change would have been obvious only to those who beat the game. In the original Japanese ending, the credit roll was interactive; players could skate around, tag, and play with the names of the developers – all, of course, written in Japanese. Since localising that level would have required rebuilding it from the ground up, CONTINUED >.

The game came with a vandalism warning. We wonder how many young up-and-coming street artists this game actually inspired.

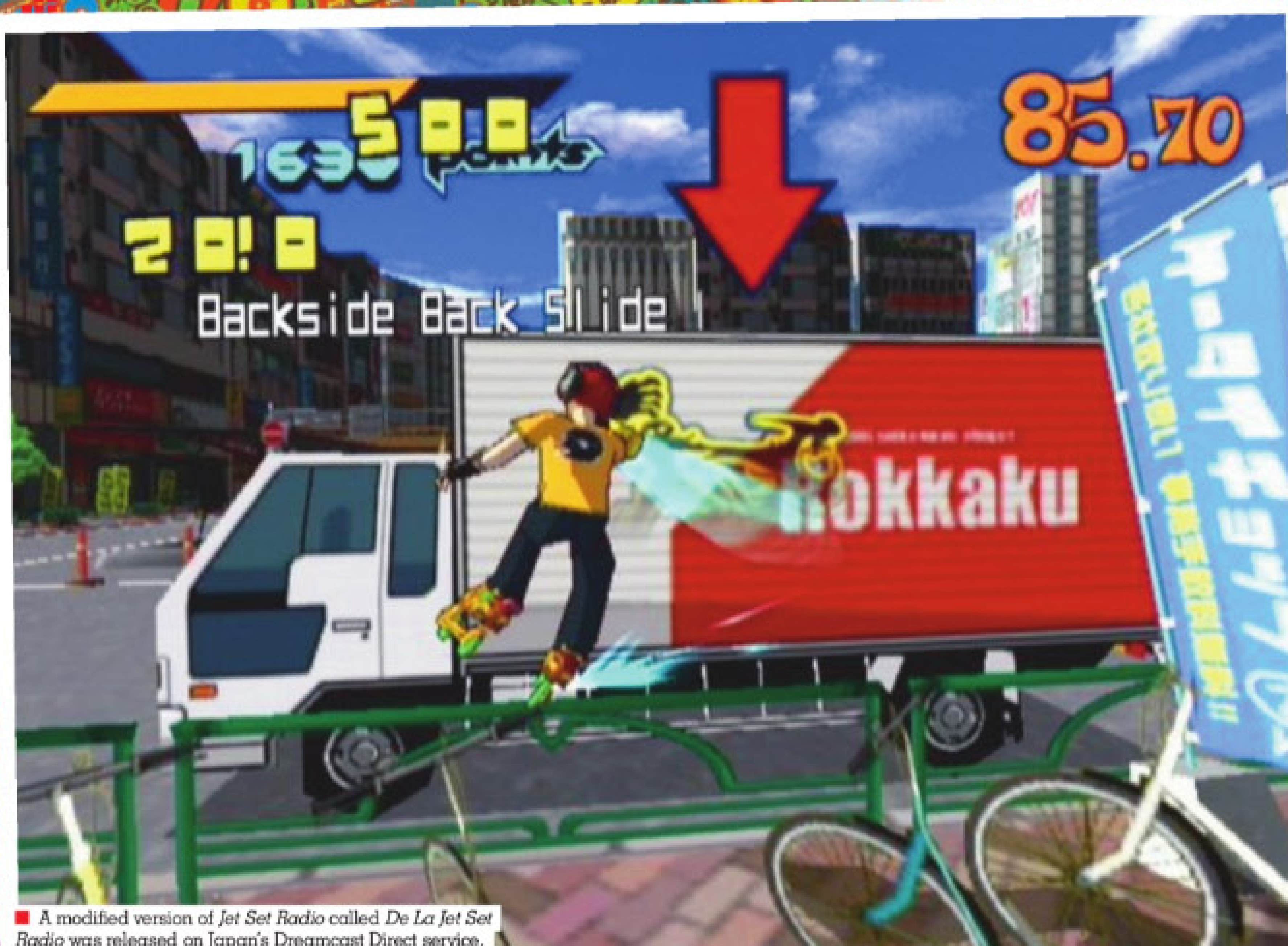
Graffiti is art. However, graffiti as an act of vandalism is a crime. Every state/province has vandalism laws that apply to graffiti, and local entities such as cities and counties have anti-graffiti ordinances.

Violation of these laws can result in a fine, probation, or a jail sentence.

SEGA does not condone the real life act of vandalism in any form.



Characters Beat and Gum appeared in *Sega Superstars Tennis*, and Gum also popped up in *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*.



A modified version of *Jet Set Radio* called *De La Jet Set Radio* was released on Japan's Dreamcast Direct service, featuring additional levels and music from the PAL game.

Why No Sequel?

FOR A GAME that's so fondly remembered and influential to have only one sequel is uncommon in the videogame industry. We got the impression during our interview that the reasons have more to do with the higher-ups at Sega than a lack of desire for a sequel. We were greeted by nervous laughter when we pointed out that there was "*Jet Set Radio*, then *Future*, then nothing." It's apparent that the entire team wasn't happy with the decision, a certain member responding under his breath, "Sega..." before mumbling something else under his breath. He obviously wasn't happy with the decision.

However, there are several valid reasons the series ended where it did. "We wanted to do something different. For a year or two afterwards, we were on different arcade or action adventure titles... Then, after we proved we could make a town, we wanted to make a game that had human drama in it," says Ueda, referring to the *Yakuza* series. He continues: "The Dreamcast, being our own hardware, allowed us to experiment with lots of things. Now, we have to think, "Hmmm.... will this sell?... Games like this are pretty expensive to make."

this time with every credited individual's name written in English, the sequence was cut in its entirety.

Not everyone was happy about these changes. Ueda's pride, both national and personal, was wrapped up in the Japanese style and nature of *JSR*. He felt the team had made an amazing game that showed off the cool and hip side of Japanese culture to the world. Adding levels based on foreign locales was watering down the essential 'Japanese-ness' of the game. All the while, he admits to thinking about the possibilities of new levels. "While I was against it, at the same time I was protesting. I kept on thinking, 'What if we did add new levels – what would I do?'" Ueda couldn't stop thinking about it, and the longer he did, the more elaborate his plans became. Eventually it was decided, and the team created the new stages.

DESPITE THESE NUMEROUS changes, the game's memorable soundtrack, composed by Hideki Naganuma, stayed intact, albeit with the addition of licensed tracks from the likes of Jurassic 5 and Mixmaster Mike, plus new tracks from *Sonic R* maestro Richard Jacques. Despite being the same age as Ueda and Kikuchi, and thus part of the same cohort (an incredibly important relationship in Japanese business and culture), Naganuma has since left Sega. When Ueda and Kikuchi speak of him and his role on *JSR*, one gets the feeling that they viewed themselves as a part of a trio that helped shape the game and eventually its legacy. That word,

> WE WANTED TO MAKE A KIND OF ACTION GAME THAT HAD NEVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE

legacy, draws laughs from Ueda when we first use it in our interview. Ueda and Kikuchi aren't really sure that the game has something that deserves the word 'legacy', even to the extent that the game's original success surprised them. While they're very proud of the game and the fanbase it created, they're not sure *JSR* influenced other games, with the exception of Sega's own *Yakuza* series. While both of them suggest there are games incorporating grinding or certain art styles that may be influenced

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION


The appearance of *PaRappa The Rapper* on PSone hardened the *Jet Set Radio* team's resolve to make a truly original pop-culture-infused game.


Getting Up was one of the few games that borrowed *JSR*'s graffiti mechanic, resulting in it getting banned in Australia.



by *JSR*, they're not convinced that such an influence actually exists, but would be happy if it did. Whether such humility is honest, or merely symptomatic of the kind of self-effacement that's expected in Japanese society, we can't say. However, Ueda does mention that other developers, non-Japanese developers in particular, often tell him, 'I love *Jet Set*.' Such respect from foreign development houses resulted in Ueda being invited to the Nordic Game conference in Denmark.

KIKUCHI AND UEDA have constantly kept the game fresh in people's memories by inserting references into other games, particularly in the *Yakuza* series, which Ueda jokes, "is in the same universe as *JSR*, like the Marvel or DC universes." The last boss of *JSR* can be found in a public restroom in the first *Yakuza* game, begging for toilet paper, "See, right there. The same universe," Ueda points out.

Bringing up the various elements that he left scattered throughout the games he's worked on brings out an excitement rarely seen in the usually calm Ueda. However, he lets Kikuchi explain most of the influences. "See this?" he asks, pointing towards a portrait of the character Garam in the *JSR* manual. "See his necklace? It's a skull, and while we were working on *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, I found it on the stomach of one of the bosses. It's a strange shape, isn't it? I asked Mr. Ueda what it was, and he told me that it's the skull of another famous Sega character."

While we wouldn't hold our breath for a sequel (see Why No Sequel?) there is a glimmer of hope for those who would like to see *JSR* make a return. We asked the two developers point-blank whether we could look forward to playing the game on XBLA, PSN, or some other downloadable game service, and at first they weren't forthcoming. Kikuchi simply told us "maybe." But no sooner had the word left his mouth than a wry smile crossed his face and Ueda burst out laughing. He pointed towards Kikuchi and said, "Look at his face, his nose gets longer when he says 'maybe.'" If that isn't confirmation enough for you, a recently leaked screenshot from what appears to be a French language version of Xbox Live Arcade (or PartnerNet, Microsoft's XBLA test bed), shows *Jet Set Radio* as a playable game. Fans aren't going to get their long-awaited sequel, but Xbox owners will likely get an upscaled, HD *JSR*.

As much as we would like to see a sequel, there are far more ignoble fates for a beloved series, something that Sega fans are well aware of. Perhaps it's for the best that *JSR* be left alone. Kikuchi seems content to work on the *Yakuza* series, and it looks like he's bringing a certain brand of Dreamcast-era Sega craziness to the next (zombie-filled) entry in the traditionally serious series, *Yakuza: Of The End*. We'd love to see a hi-def outing for Beat and crew, but the heart of the series lives on in other Sega titles.


Grinding worked much as it had in the *Sonic Adventure* games. Exept here its inclusion made more sense.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures

DETAILS

FORMAT: Atari 2600
YEAR: 1983
PUBLISHER: Sparrow Records
DEVELOPER: Christian Software Development
EXPECT TO PAY: £2,000 - 3,000

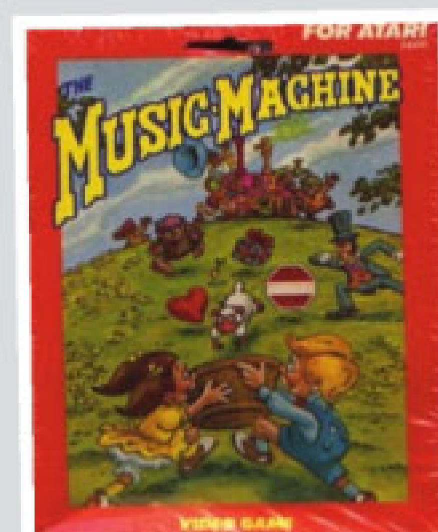


EXHIBIT A: Good luck finding this in the wild. It's only appeared on eBay once before. Who knows how many are left?

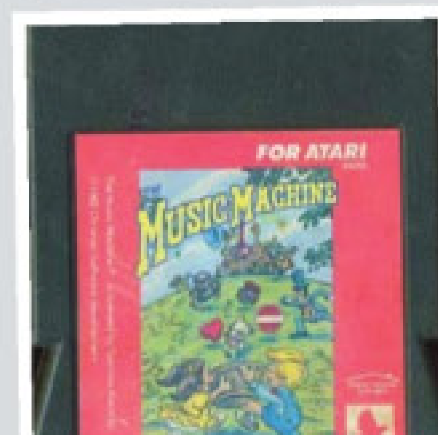


EXHIBIT B: If you get a sealed copy then you'd be foolish to take the cartridge out. Just play a ROM and retain the value of your collection.



THE MUSIC MACHINE

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

LIKE MANY OF the world's rarest videogames, *The Music Machine* is hard to find because it was never officially released in a wide number of retail outlets. Instead, *The Music Machine* was only ever available in religious bookstores – hardly the sort of place that most Atari 2600 fanatics would have been doing their shopping in 1983. Created to tie-in with a popular Christian album of the same name, *The Music Machine* was reportedly sold in bundles with the vinyl and likely didn't end up in the hands of that many games players at all. These two factors, combined with a presumably limited print run, make the cartridge very hard to find indeed. In fact, it is one of the single rarest games currently known to exist on the VCS, with a rarity rating of 10/10 on popular fansite AtariAge. "These games are almost impossible to find in the wild," says the website. "Even collectors who have been at it for years may never run across one of these, and they often make up the showcase of an individual's collection. These rarely show up even on Ebay, and if they do there will most likely be a bidding war."

Worth Playing?

IN MANY WAYS *The Music Machine* really is a good game. Heavily inspired by Activision's *Kaboom!*, it has a proven and enjoyable gameplay that instantly sets it apart from most other licensed Atari 2600 games. Using the paddle controllers, you simply move the characters from side to side, catching dropped objects in your basket and trying not to miss anything. As the game progresses, the speed and frequency of item drops increases and the game becomes more difficult. It's a simple concept, but a fun one for the time. Nowadays, however, it hasn't really got what it takes to entertain. If you really wanted to play this sort of game then you could easily acquire a copy of *Kaboom!* for just a couple of pounds, saving yourself thousands. So *The Music Machine* really is just a collector's item and not something you would ever buy in order to enjoy the game itself; it certainly isn't a game that any old collector would want. Unless you're lucky enough to buy it from someone who doesn't recognise its value, this is something that's going to cost several months' disposable income, and is therefore the preserve of super-collectors who own every other rare cartridge around and are now looking for those prize centrepieces.



FACT! Sparrow Records is still around today at www.sparrowrecords.com. It doesn't seem to sell games anymore, though, sadly.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Jose Artiles**
Occupation: **Teacher**

What is it about Atari games and *The Music Machine* in particular that is attractive to you?
Being one of the top collectors of Atari 2600 items in the world, *The Music Machine* was one of the very few titles I still needed to complete my Atari 2600 boxed collection. To boot, the copy I acquired was shrinkwrapped, which adds value to the game.

Please tell us how/where you found the game.
I was roaming around ebay and I found the game being offered… Boy, was I excited. When I found it, I knew I had to get it so I patiently waited for the auction to end and I put in my bid right at the end. There was a bidding war at the end and my bid raised the auction price at the time over $1,000.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
The game was in mint condition and it included a piece of literature that had never been seen before for this title. This pamplet has information on other Sparrow/Birdwing products. It also had a coupon I have never seen before, giving the buyer of the game $1.00 off if they bought a Sparrow/Birdwing product from the pamphlet. The final auction price was $5,665.55… In fact, I thought it was going to go higher since it had never appeared on eBay and it was a 'complete in box' title that many Atari 2600 collectors need.

Do you actually play *The Music Machine* and, if so, what do you think of it?
Yes, I have played the game and it is not that bad. It is like another very popular Atari 2600 game called *Kaboom!* but with a religious angle to it.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game or is it yours for life?
Never, this game was very hard for me to find and acquire. The game will stay in my collection forever and will, eventually, be one of the top attractions in my future Atari 2600 museum. I am very happy with my acquisition and this title is definitely one of the cornerstones of my collection.

PAPER WITH ATTITUDE

games™ looks back at the world's longest-running videogame adaptation, Sonic The Comic, and talks to the artists and writers who made the publication possible

BACK IN THE Nineties, the creation of *Sonic The Hedgehog* was something of a cultural phenomenon. Not only was the enigmatic character a leading mascot for the face of Sega, he was also a worthy competitor for Mario. Sonic contributed to Sega's cool and hip image and he was soon integrated into the mainstream, with his own TV shows, figurines, T-shirts, lunch boxes and pin badges.

It was this underlying popularity and passion within popular culture that prompted Sega to team up with Fleetway Publications in order to create a comic showcasing their newest creation. Richard Burton (better known for his work on *2000 AD*) was the first editor responsible for the magazine and hired Nigel Kitching to write the storylines and also invited Richard Elson to draw one of his scripts after seeing images the artist had produced for a yearbook. Elson went on to draw the eye-catching covers of the magazine and was also involved with drawing the main strips for most issues.

"The editor usually rang and told me which story they wanted the cover to feature. I'd do a couple of rough ideas and fax/email them into the office. After the editor had chosen a favourite, I drew a scaled-up version of the rough onto the full-size paper, usually keeping it pretty close to the original design. Once the pencils were satisfactory I inked the page with a Pentel Brush Pen and a few fine-line pens, using French Curves for the big arcs on Sonic's head." Nigel Dobbyn's involvement came about after Kitching's constant pitching to the editor, who relented to allow him to be responsible for the Knuckles strip among a few others. Roberto Corona's arrival came about because, at a convention, he showed his portfolio to Richard Burton, who then assigned the artist to work primarily on Tails scripts.

Unlike certain other comics, particularly those made by Marvel, *Sonic The Comic* was written as a full script before any artwork was drawn. "The writer proposes a story idea to the editor. The script is written and sent to the editor. On approval the script then goes on to the artist and the strip is drawn. The lettering is added at the end," explains Kitching. All the writers and artists were employed on a freelance basis, which resulted in a lot of phone calls. "I worked closely with some of the artists who illustrated my scripts, such as Richard Elson and Nigel Dobbyn. It made sense to involve the artists in the creative process, but I was unusual in taking this approach. But I was good friends with both Rich and Nigel and this was a pleasant way to work," remarks Kitching. "A comic script is like a screenplay except that visuals are more closely described. One of the most important purposes of the script is to tell the artist what needs to be drawn and give him some indication of the drama required. However, I will say that I talked to Richard or Nigel very early in the creative process and these conversations often generated great ideas that I doubt I would have been able to come up with alone."

IT MADE SENSE TO INVOLVE THE ARTISTS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS



RICHARD ELSON
Artist

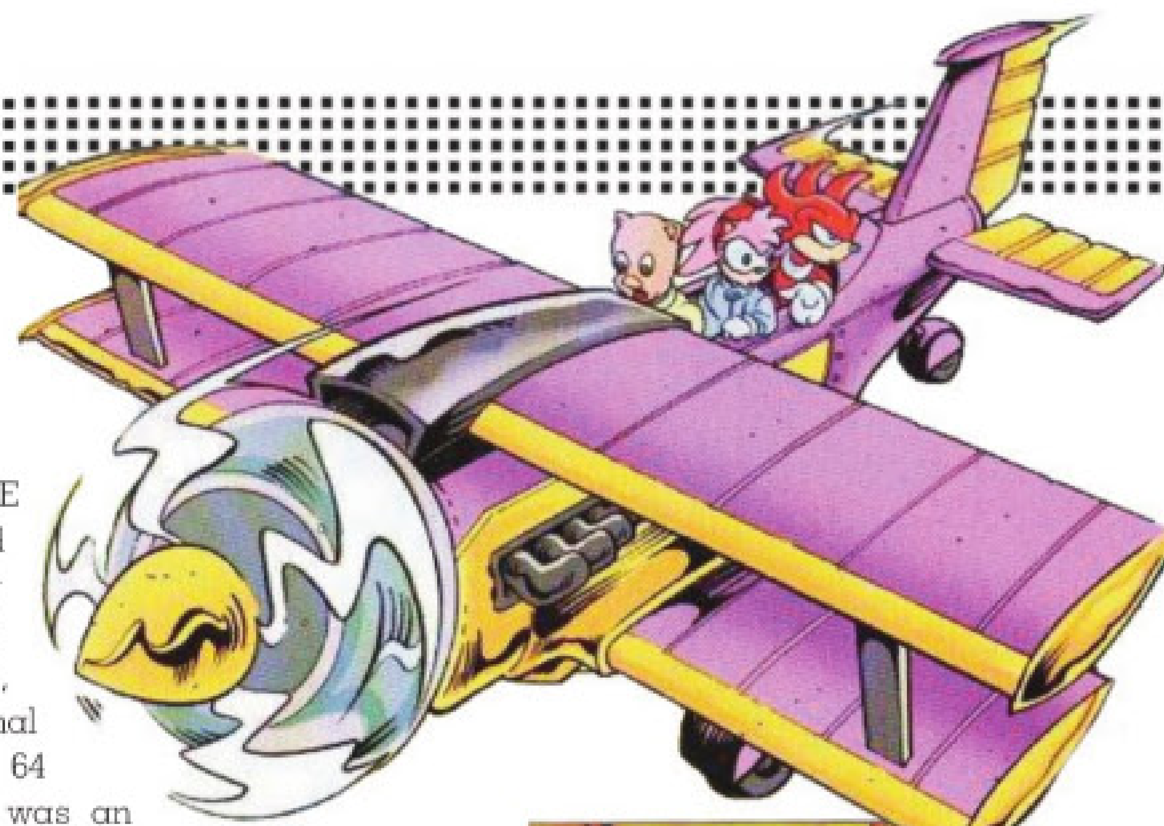
Though the comic was based on videogame properties, the writers were free to create their own stories that were not directly based on the games. "I used the games as story inspiration early on, but as I introduced more of my own ideas, the stories moved away CONTINUED >.

from the games' plots," says Kitching. "I played the Sonic games and made sure I finished them. In the early days, when I was taking plot ideas from them, I figured the most useful ideas were likely to be at the end of the game." Controversially, Richard Elson was more fond of Nintendo's creation. "I played all of the games but was always a Mario fan and still am. There's just not enough to do on Sonic games."

When it came to drawing the characters, each artist began in a similar manner, as Elson explains: "I would usually make a cup of coffee, read the script, make another cup of coffee and then re-read it, drawing thumbnail breakdowns on top of the script pages. I would then lay out the panels on the watercolour paper (Waterford 140lb HP) and rough in poses of the characters and backgrounds. I would draw and very often re-draw until I thought that the pages were looking good. Then it was out with the Pentel Brush Pen and fine liners for inking. Scan in the final inked pages after rubbing out all of the pencil lines, and colour in Photoshop."

NIGEL KITCHING
Writer

Roberto Corona had a somewhat different process. "The steps were: 1) read the script and nut out a little thumbnail layout for each page; 2) draw up the frames in pencil for page one and then pencil in the artwork; 3) ink over the pencils – my pencils were very tight so inking was pretty straightforward. Erase the pencils once all the outlines are done, and then add heavy blacks. I inked with waterproof fibre tips; 4) mark up the back of each page with contact details and story name/page number; 5) photocopy the black-and-white artwork for posterity – the colourists would be working directly onto my pages; 6) chuck it in the mail."



ALTHOUGH THE ARTISTS may have had their own ideas of how Sonic and his friends should be captured, Sega didn't. "The original style guide was about 64 pages long, and there was an outline of a hand on the front cover that you were supposed to press your own hand to while reciting a pledge to uphold Sonic brand standards. It was pretty basic, no smoking, no killing (except of robots), no guns, stick to the model sheets, and so on. About halfway through my tenure, the new licensing agency came up with revised guidelines for drawing Sonic, where the number, orientation and position of his spikes would vary from each angle. We were never to show his teeth. His pupils always had to be touching some part of the outside of his eyes. It was just plain stupid," remembers Corona. "Violence was often a touchy subject but in some strange ways. A scene in *Knuckles* involving a lynching had to be re-drawn to place the noose around his body, rather than his neck, even though he didn't actually get close to being hanged," adds Dobbyn. "A scene that Richard Elson drew involving Sonic and a gun had to be re-drawn to have the gun fire a sucker dart." Despite this stance regarding Sonic, other franchises seemed to be fair game. "In *Decap Attack* I got away with murder," exclaims Kitching. "In one story I showed a head being opened up and the brain removed – I'm absurdly proud of this for some reason."

Sonic The Comic wasn't just an anthology of Sega-based stories; it was also a canny marketing tool. Reviews of the latest Sega games were included along with news pages of upcoming releases and cheat pages for popular titles. It was a great way to tap into another user base and even influence purchasing decisions. The Megadroid was a mascot created by Richard Burton himself to answer the queries of the readership and was constructed from parts of a Mega Drive. Other Sega titles also got the comic strip treatment including *Wonderboy*, *Shinobi*, *Golden Axe*, *Kid Chameleon* and *Streets Of Rage*.



STC's stories soon left the games behind to tell new and original tales.



Decap Attack was the one comic where anything was allowed to happen. Nigel Kitching drew and wrote the entire series.

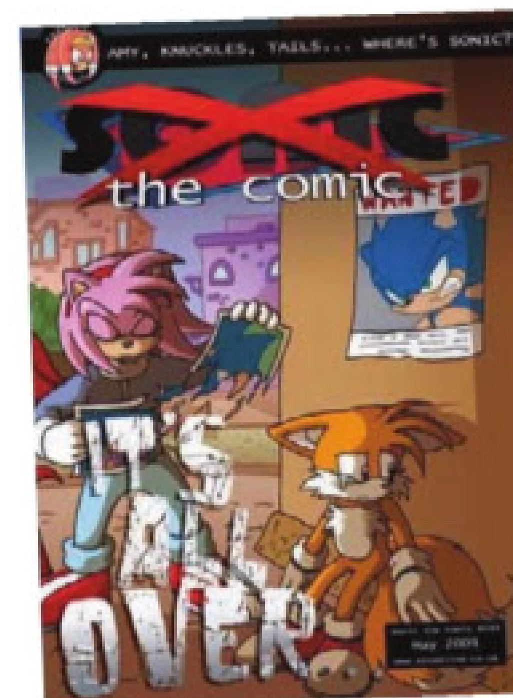
Memorable Moments

The team recount their favourite bits

Every artist has their favourite piece of work and the team behind *STC* are just the same. "It would have been Zonerunner 2, but the colouring was a complete disaster – sorry, colourist guy whose name I can't recall," apologises Roberto Corona. "Return To The Miracle Planet jumps to mind in relation to this question, possibly because it was nice and atmospheric. I really love the Time After Time strip – I think that was its name – by Lew, in which Sonic seems to come back in time as an older version of himself. Andy Pritchard, who coloured it, and I argued over which pages we were going to keep." Nigel Dobbyn likewise has a specific series in mind: "Nigel [Kitching] and I both have very fond memories of the 'homecoming' sequence of stories from Knuckles, in which he went through all sorts of different genres – horror, western, eco-adventure and so on. It was great fun trying to establish a different mood for each story." From an editor's perspective, it is a certain artist that evokes the most memories. "Commissioning new artwork from Mike McMahon was always a rare treat for an old-school *2000AD* fanboy like myself," recalls Andy Diggle.

VENTURING ONLINE

ALTHOUGH THE PRINT magazine folded in 2002, a team of fans carried on the work with Sonic The Comic Online. Visit **http://www.stconline.co.uk** for details. Those who followed the original magazine will be intrigued to know that unused ideas have made it onto the website. "I did pass on some of my ideas to the guys who are doing *STC* online. They are producing rather good continuations of the *STC* strips," remarks Nigel Kitching. "I really can't say how impressed I am at the dedication and talent that goes into STC Online," comments Roberto Corona. "It's great that those guys refused to accept the end just because the publisher decided to pull the plug. And the fact that it's actually good is awesome. More power to them." Andy Diggle is also pleased the comic found a new home. "It's nice to see that *STC* actually *has* an online presence. Egmont was too tightfisted and infuriatingly resistant to having any kind of web presence back in my day. They wouldn't even stump up a meagre £50 for me to hire a *Sonic The Comic* table at the Bristol Comic Con. I don't think they knew what the internet even *was* back then…"





Captain Plunder was a solo series drawn by Nigel Dobbyn.



> THE GUIDELINES FOR DRAWING SONIC [STATED] WE WERE NOT TO SHOW HIS TEETH

AS THE COMIC strips developed, so did the characters who starred within their panels. New Sonic characters were introduced including Johnny Lightfoot and Porker Lewis, who were officially created by Sega to represent the rabbits and pigs freed from the badniks. Original character Captain Plunder emerged and the arrival of Lew Stringer in issue 30 saw him introduce Shortfuse, Metamorphia and Tekno the Canary. Some strips reflected their videogame heritage, *The Sonic Terminator* being an adaptation of *Sonic CD* and *Sonic And Knuckles* reflected in Knuckles and the Floating Island strips. In the landmark issue 100 Dr Robotnik was finally defeated. "I realised that no matter how many times Sonic thwarted Robotnik's plans it was a hollow victory as long as Robotnik remained as the dictator and ruling over Mobius," explains Kitching. "Not a very positive message for the readers: evil can never actually be defeated. So I decided to have Robotnik defeated for real. This also meant that I would have to find different ways of coming up with plots." After this point, *Sonic 3D Blast* was adapted featuring key elements such as the Flickies and dimensional time travel, which went on to influence the direction of future stories. With the change in power over Mobius, the Drakon Empire was created, an inter-dimensional alien race who allied themselves with Dr Robotnik, which was followed by a long series involving a new world called Shanazar.



NIGEL DOBBYN
Artist

The demise of the comic began in 1997 when budget cuts saw the removal of news, game and review sections, making it solely about comic strips. Although *STC* continued to sell well, in 1998 the strange decision to start publishing reprints was made and the popular Megadroid mascot was removed, along with letter pages Speedlines. Once issues 155-157 had been reached, only one original strip remained, the rest consisting entirely of reprinted material. At this stage, Nigel Kitching was sacked (a matter upon which he hasn't commented) while Lew Stringer remained the sole writer. Kitching made a comeback in 2000 after a change in editorship, yet despite this, all issues from 185 onwards were entirely reprints, with Richard Elson's covers being the only new material. Nigel Kitching's reappearance resulted in a last epic story very loosely based on *Sonic Adventure* where the Chaos monster emerged and Johnny Lightfoot came to an untimely end. The story went on to reveal the origins of chaos, the Chaos Emeralds, Knuckles and wrap up the loose ends of the Sonic world so expertly captured within the comic.

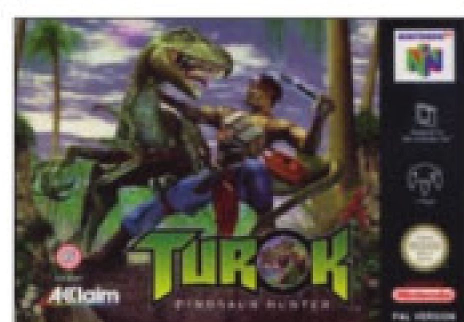
While *Sonic The Comic* is now but a memory for many, everyone who worked on it in some capacity is proud of its success. "To this day, I still get regular emails from people expressing their fondness for *STC*. The fans are the real legacy of the comic because so many of them have gone on to produce brilliant creative work themselves," remarks Richard Elson. "I still get feedback from readers who have now grown up and are producing their own comic strips. At a recent Bristol show someone told me that I was the artist who made them want to draw comics in the first place. That was very gratifying.



BEHIND THE SCENES

TUROK: DINOSAUR HUNTER

When Doom launched in 1993 the BFG 9000 was the ultimate FPS cannon, but in 1997 a young development team made id Software's finest look like a water pistol



Released: 1997
Format: N64
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment
Developer: Iguana Entertainment

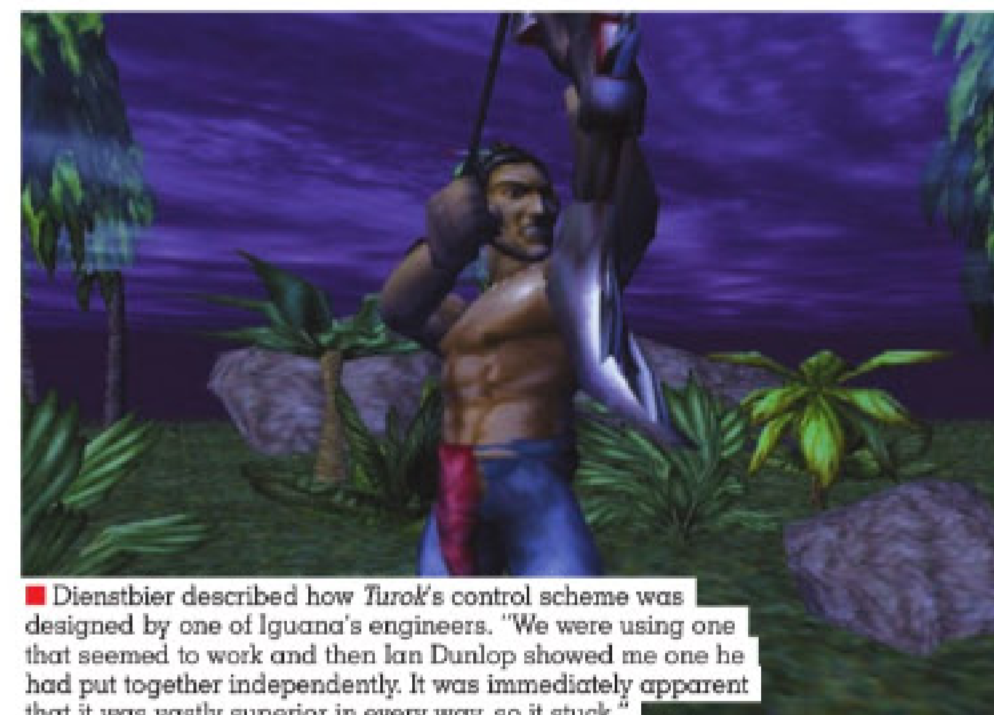
KEY STAFF:
David Dienstbier Producer
Alan D. Johnson Lead Artist
Robert Cohen Lead Programmer
Ian Dunlop Game Logic



WHEN THE NINTENDO 64 finally hit European shores in 1997, UK gamers were presented with just three titles to take home as their first 64-bit experience. Considering the hefty price of these games, most of us had to make a tough buying decision. The smart money was obviously on *Super Mario 64*, as the majesty of Shigeru Miyamoto's masterpiece was (and remains) one of the greatest launch titles ever conceived. *Pilotwings 64* also acted as a technical showcase for the fledgling console's capabilities, and *Shadows Of The Empire* offered LucasArts fans an underwhelming slice of *Star Wars* action. But while the fanciful boxart of a Han Solo wannabe, a trio of eager looking aviators and Mario in a winged cap all had their distinct charms, for many it was the brutally rendered image of a hunter about to plunge ten inches of cold steel into the neck of a velociraptor – which arrived in stores three days after the hardware launched – that presented the most intriguing proposition. The title on the box boldly read *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, and it was a game inspired by a long lineage of comic books.

The *Turok* concept first appeared in a one-shot published by Dell Comics in 1954, before receiving its own *Turok: Son Of Stone* series, which was first published by Dell, and then by Gold Key, consistently throughout the late Fifties, Sixties, Seventies and early Eighties. Then, nearly a decade later, the Turok character was revived by Valiant Comics CONTINUED >.

I NEVER DOUBTED TUROK SHOULD BE AN FPS. THERE WAS PRESSURE TO MAKE IT THIRD-PERSON



Dienstbier described how *Turok*'s control scheme was designed by one of Iguana's engineers. "We were using one that seemed to work and then Ian Dunlop showed me one he had put together independently. It was immediately apparent that it was vastly superior in every way, so it stuck."













In Japan, *Turok 2: Seeds Of Evil* was given the more visceral title of *Violence Killer: Turok New Generation.*

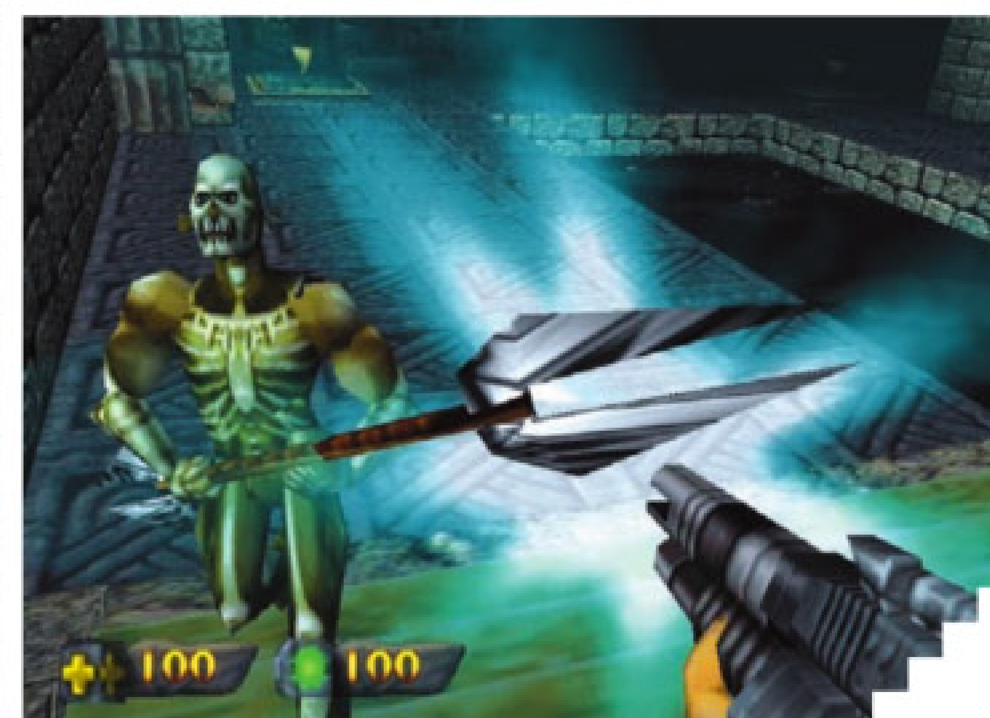






Dinosaur Hunter used a fog system to mask the limitations of its draw distance. This also helped keep the frame rate relatively smooth.







FROM THE FORUM

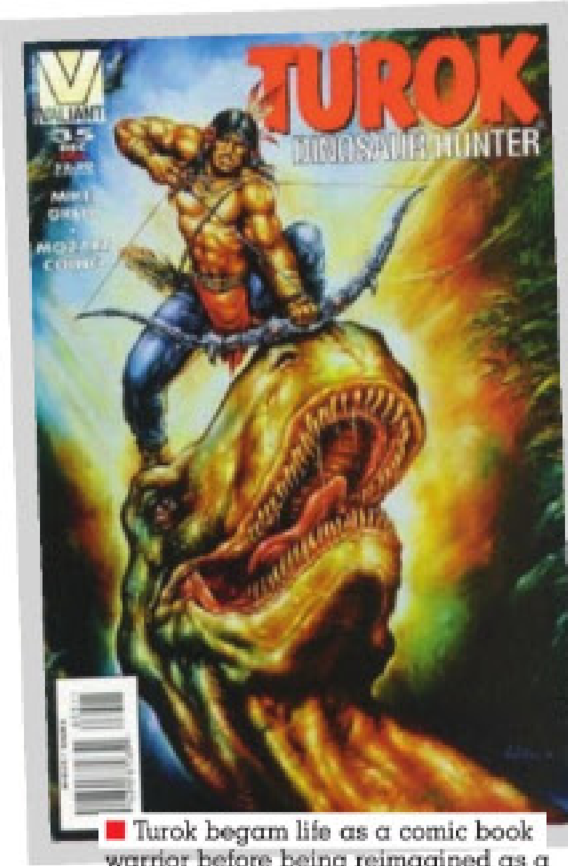
Posted by: BIONIC COMMANDO
I think people underestimate the influence of *Turok*. Not only was it a fairly original concept at the time, but it broke down a lot of boundaries. Sure, the controls weren't up to much and it was a little too misty for its own good, but the diverse range of weapons and creative enemies made it something of a milestone of the early generation.

Posted by: MICHAELARBY
It had this really weird atmosphere about it. I was 11 and 3D was still in its infancy, but something about the level design was unsettling. Really gave this sense of isolation, possibly because of the scale of the levels, and the fact there were no real cut-scenes. You were just planted in the world and told go.

Posted by: RICHHOYLE24
Shaking as I handed over the £70 for a game for the first (and last) time. I also preferred the sequel.

Posted by: SHERAK
I loved everything about *Turok*, even the iguana that popped his head up at the start before nearly getting an arrow in its eye. The dinosaurs also attacked all humans, so you could lure a raptor into the vicinity of a hunter and watch them finish each other off!

Posted by: ROSETINTED GAMER
It was the music that stuck in my mind. An awesome soundtrack to an awesome game.



■ Turok begam life as a comic book warrior before being reimagined as a fully-fledged videogame hero.

before receiving a full series titled *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* in 1993. From here *Turok* stopped being a prehistoric adventure as the Lost Valley was rewritten as an alien dimension where Turok fought against the 'Bionisaurs' with futuristic weaponry. Acclaim Entertainment then bought Valiant Comics in 1994 – changing the name to Acclaim Comics in 1996 – as well as acquiring Iguana Entertainment in 1995. It was around this time that an eager David Dienstbier first joined the reptilian ranks of Iguana.

"I responded to a recruitment ad by sending in some original game concepts which I'd illustrated," recalls Dienstbier on how he first got involved with Iguana. "What caught the creative director's eye was that I didn't just send in drawings, I actually had notes written up about the story and how the enemies moved and worked. I was then hired as a designer and, after working for several months on other projects, I was called into the president's office and told they were going to make me project manager on my own title. I was a bit shocked since I had no experience at all, and when I mentioned this he said something to the effect of, 'You're a smart guy, you'll figure it out'. I was then told an arrangement had been made for Acclaim to do an exclusive title for Nintendo, and that the decision to base it on the *Turok* property had already been made – which was cool because I had read *Turok* comics as a kid. I just had to figure out what it was going to be."



In retrospect, the results speak for themselves, as *Turok* became an early pioneer for the console FPS. But following his abrupt career change Dienstbier described how he had to battle to keep his vision of *Turok* on track. "I never had any doubts that *Turok* should be an FPS, but most of the discussions about whether to go first- or third-person came from our New York offices. After *Tomb Raider* released there was significant pressure to make *Turok* a third-person action game, but I and others saw this as a mistake because *Turok* was going to make its own mark in a genre that [at the time] had no real presence on the home consoles aside from ports of *Doom*. I didn't feel that Turok, as a character, had what Lara Croft had. She was designed to be a star and needed to be on-screen. *Turok* was envisioned as a vehicle for the types of crazy shit we wanted to do. Obviously we respected the source material and the character, but we also had our sights set on doing some pretty wild stuff, and so the action became the star."


ALAN JOHNSON
Lead Artist

Work on *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* began in 1995 in a development cycle that would span 16 months. Although the project initially consisted of just Dienstbier, he was soon joined by other creative talents like lead artist Alan Johnson. "I had been working on *Batman Forever: The Arcade Game* for about six months as a character artist," recalls Johnson, "when one day, out of the blue, my director tells me I'm being moved onto a new project called *Turok*. I think the more senior staff wanted to remain on *Batman* since it was the premier title, and nobody expected much from *Turok*. So at the time it seemed like I had drawn the short straw, but I was certainly interested in working on something new."

■■■ NOT ONLY WAS this an opportunity to craft a new game, but the team were also facing the challenge of developing for an unreleased console that was shrouded in mystery. "It's funny because, while my excitement was very high, it was kind of lukewarm at higher levels," Dienstbier described when asked about Iguana's early impressions of the N64 hardware. "I think this was largely because everyone thought Nintendo was backwards in sticking to cartridges. No one really knew what to expect from the N64 in terms of sales, so that kind of cast a shadow on the hardware." Johnson also shared this enthusiastic scepticism. "It meant developing for a somewhat moving target. The estimates for how many polygons we could push would often fluctuate, so we had to rework certain aspects once we got closer to completion. The bulk of the team was also very green when it came to game development, so it really was a 'trial by fire' experience for everyone."

But while the *Turok* team was a bunch of "game development noobs", as Johnson tongue-in-cheekily described, it was clear that they had a lot of ambition and passion. And nowhere was this more evident than in Turok's impressive arsenal of weaponry, which included everything from the skilful Tek Bow, to the *Aliens*-inspired Pulse Rifle. "We had the standard fare weaponry like the pistol and shotgun," Johnson recalled, "but once we got past that we wanted to make sure each weapon was more devastating than the last. I remember the artist working on the Fusion Cannon called me into his office to take a look at what he'd done and I was completely blown away. It was nothing short of a full-blown nuclear reaction, complete with an incredibly impressive mushroom cloud. But someone decided that since Nintendo was a Japanese company, we'd be better off toning it down and losing the cloud. I was disappointed since it was the most impressive effect I'd ever seen in a game, but the artist was still able to make something very impressive. Plus I had no idea how we were going to surpass it with the Chronoscepter."

Delicate Sound of Thunder

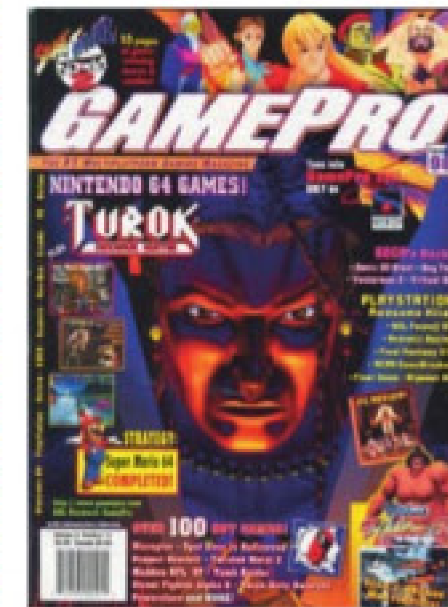
■ *TUROK* HAD JUST four boss encounters, including the 4x4-driving Longhunter, the acid spitting Giant Mantis and the utterly merciless Campaigner. But while the club-wielding Campaigner was the end boss, it was his pet Tyrannosaurus called Thunder that stole the show. "I loved that T-Rex," Johnson says. "I had a blast working on him and his animations. From day one we knew any self-respecting game with dinosaurs had to have a T-Rex boss encounter no matter what, so we set about



working out how we could make it happen. The obvious challenge was how to fight him in first-person. It wouldn't be much fun having him on top of you the whole time since you'd only see his feet, so we had to give him some ranged attacks that gave you the chance to really see him. So naturally we decided to make him breathe fire and shoot lasers. Everything is cooler with a laser strapped to its head! We also added the little cubby holes so we could have animations of the T-Rex peeking in at you. Of course, hiding in a shallow cave doesn't do much good if the thing breathes fire."



WHAT THEY SAID...



Don't sweat the little stuff, though. Turok has more firepower, more control over its environment and more gruesome graphics than other corridor shooters. The rest are Doomed to failure.

GamePro, Issue 88





■ "After we implemented the first prototype of the Grenade Launcher, we discovered how much fun it was to bounce them around while launching enemies through the air," Dienstbier states. "I then tore apart the first chunk of an entire level in order to make using the weapon more fun."

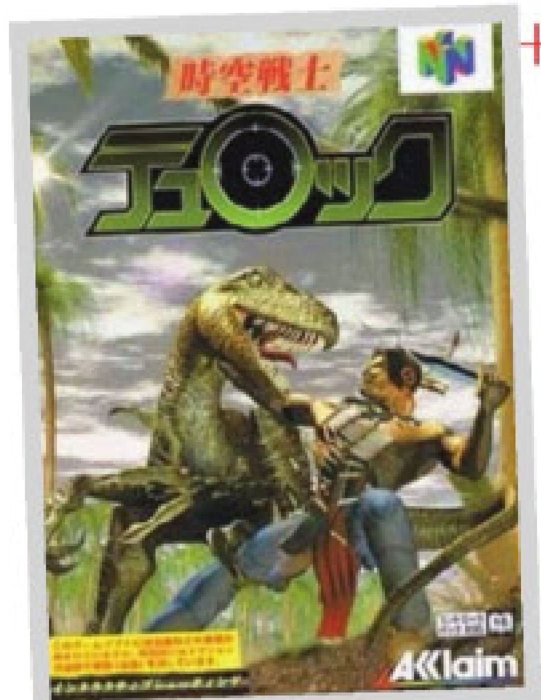
I HAD ONE LITTLE TELEVISION SET TO DEMO THE GAME ON THE FIRST DAY OF E3

■■■ THIS STYLE OF projectile one-upmanship was also the catalyst that dramatically changed Acclaim's attitude towards *Dinosaur Hunter* after it made its public debut at E3 in 1996 – an event that Dienstbier confessed as being one of his fondest memories in videogames development. "I had one little television set to demo the game on the first day of the show. There was no big fanfare about *Turok*, no massive signs or banners, and no indication that it was a flagship game for Acclaim. But we knew we were onto something big from the get-go, so during that first day I fired up demo after demo for anyone who showed any interest, and the word got out that people needed to see *Turok*. Before long there were massive crowds gathered to see the game in action. I used to tease the weapons and then gradually lead up to the Mini Gun which got lots of 'oohs' and 'aahs' and then finish with the Fusion Cannon, which would flatten a bunch of palm trees and folks would go nuts. The next thing you know I'm some sort of celebrity with the Acclaim executives at the after party. Lots of backslapping and passing of cigars transpired, and I'm pretty sure I got really loaded that night."


DAVID DIENSTBIER
Producer

After the *Turok* team recovered from their trip to Los Angeles they had less than a year to turn their beta showcase into a fully realised apache adventure. Dienstbier described how this meant making some difficult compromises. "*Turok* became a huge priority for Acclaim after the initial E3 showing. But since the team was so junior, and none of us had ever made an FPS before, we were really struggling to get everything in that we wanted. We nixed the brachiosaurs that were meant to lumber through the treetop villages, we nixed any semblance of story and we nixed certain character animations – which meant some awesome raptor-mauling went unseen. But such is the way with game development."

One aspect that didn't get nixed was the open-ended level design. The finished game flowed effectively between jungles, tombs and ruins, before cumulating in the Lost Lands and a giant fortress full of alien technology. CONTINUED >



BOX BATTLE

■ *DINOSAUR HUNTER* contained little in the way of narrative except for a short comic strip included in the manual titled *The Way Of The Warrior*. Across these 14 pages, Tal'Set and Joshua Fireseed battle towards a showdown with the Campaigner. But while Joshua takes centre stage on the boxart, the game is played entirely from the perspective of Tal'Set. This is further confounded by the fact that the Japanese release of *Turok* switched the boxart back to Tal'Set. We asked Dienstbier to elaborate. "Wow! I cannot remember ever being asked that before. It was a decision that came from 'the top' – insert evil music. Obviously I'm being cheeky, but the decision was made because they already knew they were going to move away from Tal'Set in the comics and instead focus on Joshua Fireseed. In essence, the torch was being passed and Turok was changing from a person to a sort of mantle that was handed down in the Fireseed family. At the time I objected to the change, but I also wasn't willing to make a huge fuss about it, at least not by my standards at the time."

It also distinguished itself from the corridor shooter by having a stronger focus on exploration. "It was just about laying it out, playing it, seeing what felt right and changing what didn't," Johnson described. "We had built the game in a way where the levels were pretty modular – more like a giant *Lego* set. So rearranging the levels wasn't much work if things weren't playing right. Then when I wanted new environment pieces, I would just build them myself. In the end this approach paid off and we ended up with some really fun levels which I was quite proud of."

In contrast, Dienstbier felt the level design was too disjointed and didn't capture the sense of natural progression he'd envisioned. "I actually hated the high-tech levels in the game. My desire was to create a living world, which is why so much effort went into the jungles with birds, boars, monkeys and even fish. I think we got maybe five per cent of what I would've liked to have seen in there. The original intention was to make the game feel like a journey through a junk yard. I wanted players to wander through a wide variety of environments from different times and cultures, and while I think we did an admirable job, I've never felt that any *Turok* game really captured what I had envisioned the Lost Land to be. I would've liked a more gradual transition, where the randomness of the world felt more organic and natural, rather than a stark progression from jungles to catacombs."

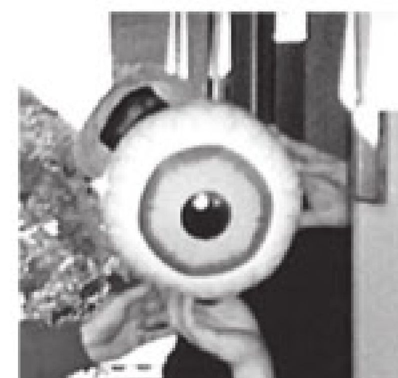


■ Dienstiber didn't just lend his vision to *Turok*, but also his voice. "We tended to use folks from the studio if they could do a good job," says Dienstbier. "I ended up doing about half the voices of the generic human grunts, as well as the Campaigner."

I ACTUALLY HATED THE HIGH-TECH LEVELS; MY DESIRE WAS TO CREATE A LIVING WORLD

■■■ HOWEVER, ONE AREA in which *Dinosaur Hunter* progressed almost too smoothly was from manageable platforming sections – already unusual for an FPS – to genuinely frustrating leaps of faith. "The platforming element ended up being a much larger part of the game simply because we didn't have many other options for managing the difficulty," Dienstbier explained. "That was a major source of frustration for players, particularly as the platforming elements became more and more difficult. So while the jumping was more fun and served the crazy nature of the action on earlier levels, by the end it became a means to try to balance the difficulty. It was a regrettable decision."

Watching Tal'Set fall to his death for the umpteenth time was an annoyance all players had to bear. But the difficulty curve was more deftly handled with the creative cast of enemies, as players encountered a wide variety of the Campaigner's henchmen including Poachers, Cyborgs, Raptors, Alien Infantry, Pur-lins, Sludge Beasts and Subterraneans. "We managed to get a lot of enemies into the game," Johnson muses, "although we ended up with a lot of humans as they could easily share animation sets. We couldn't share as many of the dinosaur animations since they were all unique. I was hoping for less humans and more dinosaurs, but I think we were able to make it work overall. I still have a sketchbook full of dinosaurs with tech upgrades that never made it into the game." **games™** implored Johnson to find this forgotten tome, but it seems to have been regrettably misplaced.



DAVID DIENSTBIER
Behind the eyeball

One aspect that could never be forgotten – especially for those who played *Turok* to completion – were the boss encounters. "The comics were ripe with lots of critters and creatures that we could've used," Dienstbier replied when asked about how the Longhunter and Giant Mantis were conceptualised. "But when it came down to bosses there weren't a lot of obvious choices directly from the comics, or at least none that we were completely satisfied with. The cybernetic T-Rex was the result of knowing that you can't do a dinosaur game without one, and since the comic had these 'enhanced' dinosaurs, we didn't need to limit ourselves. The visual side of things went very well, but it was the gameplay that was a bitch. We tried to mix up the boss battles by adding strategic elements with regard to defeating them, but by the time we were implementing them into the game, we were so strapped for time that once we had a functional encounter we had to move on. I've never really been satisfied with the results, to be honest. But alas, deadlines are deadlines."



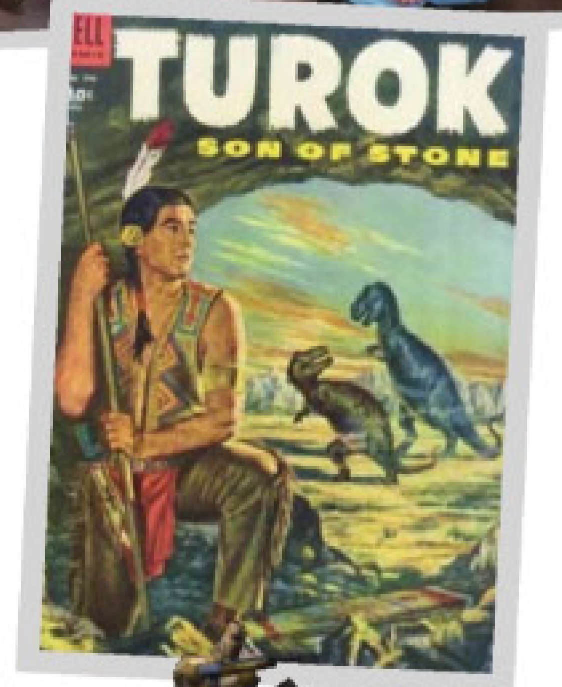
■ We asked Johnson to describe what the *Turok* team was like. "Everyone went the extra mile and made the game what it was. I wouldn't single out any one person as making the game a success. It truly was the cumulative efforts of a lot of very dedicated and talented people."





Yet as the final deadline drew close, the *Turok* team was unexpectedly given an extension to make some crucial tweaks. "I remember putting in months of serious overtime to have the game ready to ship on time for September," Johnson recalled with a nostalgic gaze, "only to find out – in September – that the date had been pushed back and we had more time to polish it up. Of course, at that point we already had a game, despite all the cuts we had made to get it done on time. So you'd think that with something shippable done and five months to add in some extra fluff, we'd be on easy street. But by cramming the cut stuff back in and adding even more content, we managed to spend the entire extension on overtime as well."

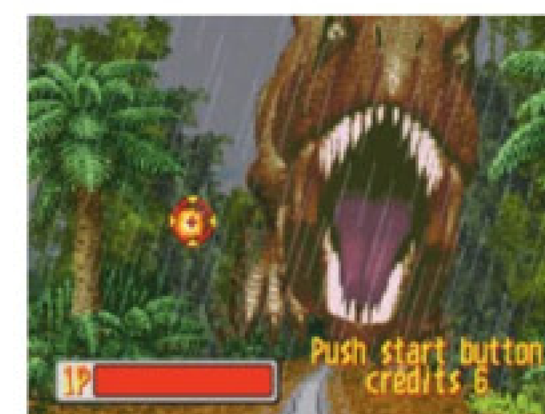
■■■ AND IT'S THIS dedication that sets *Dinosaur Hunter* apart as both a labour of love and an example of what a young and ambitious development team can achieve when given the opportunity. *Turok* started out as a low-priority project on a new console with an uncertain future, but with creative control and determination became a success. And although it may be far from perfect – as both Dienstbier and Johnson admit – *Turok* nonetheless paved the way for greater things. "*Seeds Of Evil* was a dream compared to the original *Turok*," Johnson reminisces, "as by then we had all our ducks in a row and things went considerably smoother. Actually, I'd say as far as the visuals go, *Turok 2* is more what we wanted *Turok* to be, but fell short of due to time and a lack of tech."



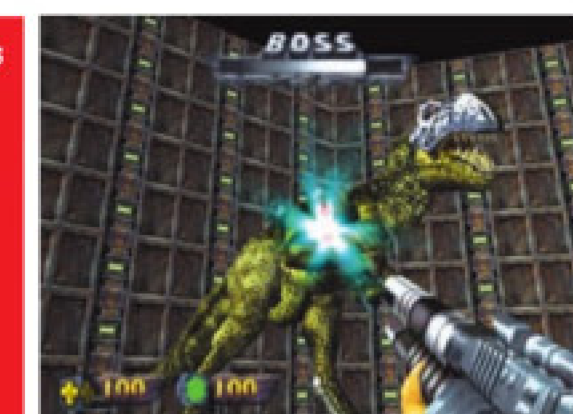
There's no denying that *Seeds Of Evil* was the series highlight, but the first expedition through the Lost Lands has a timeless quality that stands up even today. "The best thing about working on *Turok* was the experience of just doing something great," Dienstbier sums up perfectly. "Working with the team and seeing the results pay off was the best feeling in the world. I mean, the fact that all these years later you contacted me to do a story about the game is testament that we did a good job. That was, and is, a great feeling."



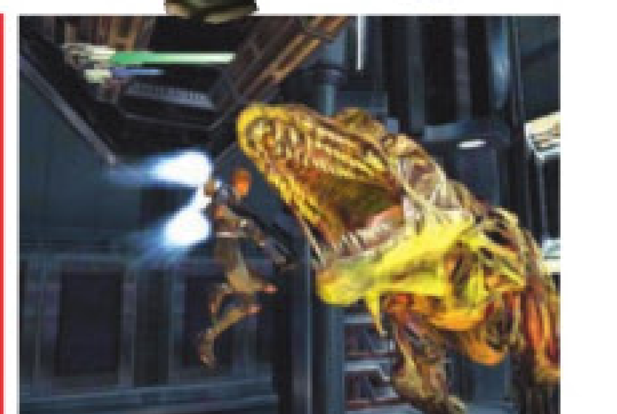
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Because *Doom* is too obvious, we felt that Sega's 1994 on-the-rails *Jurassic Park* arcade shooter deserved an honourable mention here.



Capcom's *Dino Crisis 3* took notes from *Turok* with its genetically engineered cast of dinosaurs. Too bad it was such a shambles.



BEST BOSS

COMIX ZONE Mega Drive [Sega] 1995

■ Few 16-bit action games present quite as much choice as *Comix Zone*. The comic-book-style layout enables the player to take multiple routes through the stage as they decide which adjacent panel to move to at each junction, while almost every obstacle can be overcome with either brains or brawn. And the first boss, a queen dragon whose job it is to birth the monsters you fight throughout the stage, is no different. As lead character Sketch Turner, you could stand there and repeatedly kick and punch until she eventually dies, but it takes a very long time. Smarter players will roll to the right of the screen where they'll find a hidden oil barrel. Push it towards the queen and she'll ignite it with her fiery breath and cause it to explode, killing herself in the process.

YOU'ARE FIRED!

Hall Of Fame...
Pentarou

He may be remembered as the star of comedy shoot-'em-up Parodius, but Konami's penguin mascot has a history that goes all the way back to two excellent but little-played classics

FROM RACING FEATHERED friends in *Super Mario 64* to the Prinnies of *Disgaea*, penguins have become as much a part of Japanese videogame design as vehicle sections have of Western games. It's a cultural fascination that predates recent phenomena like *March Of The Penguins* and *Happy Feet*, going back to the unexpected success of Swiss animated series *Pingu*.

Entire shops dedicated just to *Pingu* merchandise can be found on the streets of Tokyo. However, while Japan has produced a handful of *Pingu* videogames in its time, he actually isn't the most prolific of videogame penguins. That honour goes to Pentarou, an original Konami creation from 1983, who has endured to this day.

Pentarou made his debut in *Antarctic Adventure*, an unremarkable MSX game that took the player on an into-the-screen journey around research stations in Antarctica. Dodging sea lions and collecting fish was fun for a few minutes, but the virtually identical levels soon made the game rather boring to play. Later converted to other 8-bit formats, the most interesting thing about *Antarctic Adventure* is arguably the US box to the Colecovision release, which features a real penguin, joypad in hand, controlling the cartoon Pentarou. Which, as we all know, is ludicrous. As Yuji Naka recently revealed, the only game a penguin can play is Prope's cardboard box-controlled *Let's Tap*.

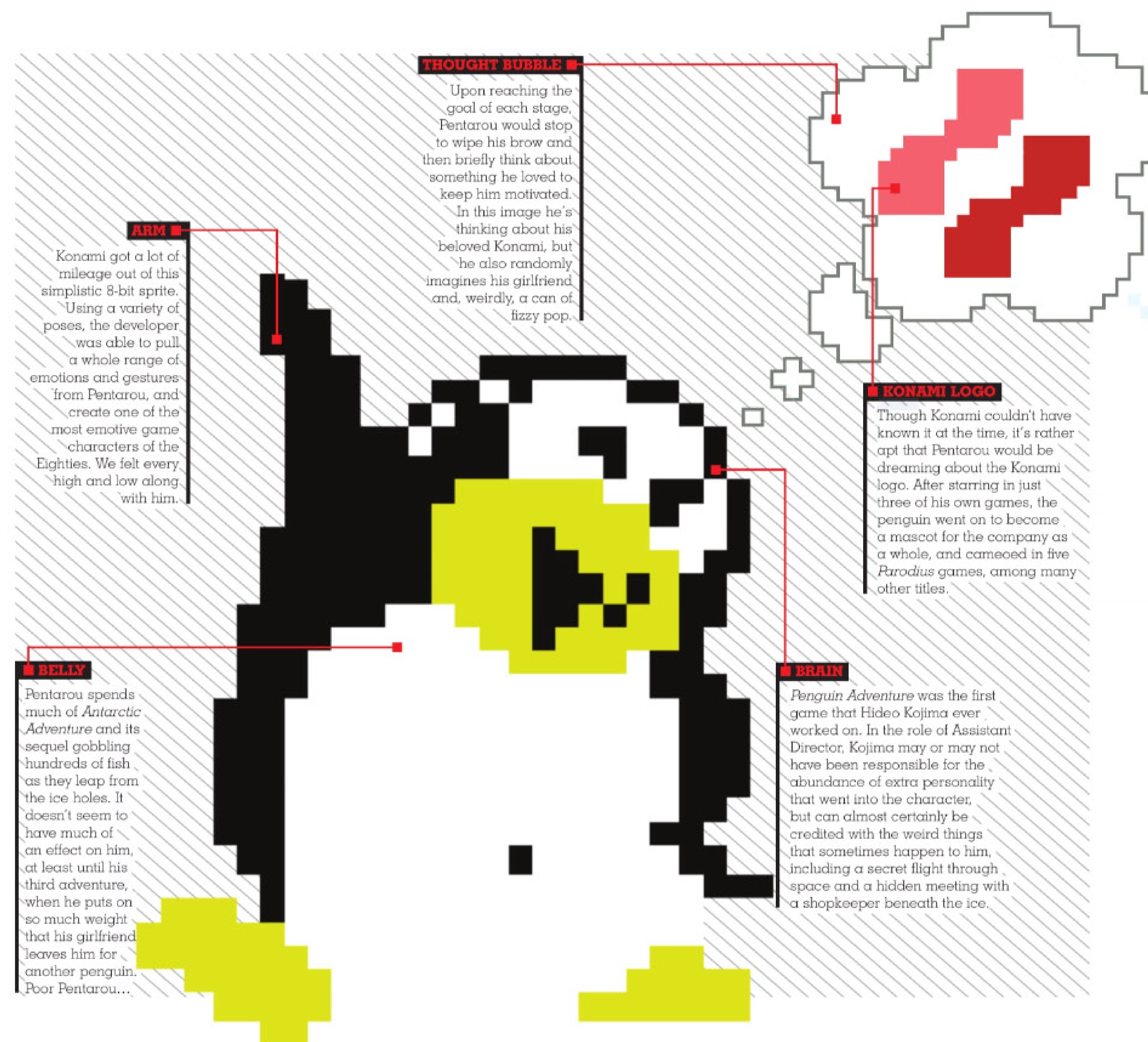
Unlike most Hall Of Famers, Pentarou didn't gain much popularity in his original game, and instead caught most attention in his sequel and subsequent appearances. Released exclusively on MSX, *Penguin Adventure* was a much-improved version of *Antarctic Adventure*. Using the same gameplay as its base, it built upon the formula with multiple levels encompassing swimming and flying sections, and a variety of power-ups, secret areas, an ever-changing soundtrack, and even boss battles to keep the game feeling fresh.

This increased focus on fun made *Penguin Adventure* one of the most fondly remembered MSX games ever made. But it was the added depth given to Pentarou himself that would ensure he rose above the series that introduced him to the world. From the title screen onward – in which our hero sheds a single tear in tribute to his lost love – *Penguin Adventure* infuses Pentarou with more character than any 8-bit sprite has a right to enjoy. Wiping his brow and dreaming of soft drinks at the end of a level, leading a majorette troupe after defeating a boss, and wildly perspiring as he marches across the map screen, Pentarou is one of the easiest 8-bit characters to like. No wonder he's been an unofficial mascot for Konami ever since.

PENTAROU'S THIRD AND final starring role, *Yume Penguin Monogatari*, brought a change of platform and genre to the penguin. Moving over to the Famicom, he found himself in a platform game and also found that his girlfriend had decided to leave him, despite the fact that he saved her life in the previous game. The reason? "I can't stand fat guys like you," she says while clinging on to her new boyfriend. Vowing to lose weight and get his girl back, Pentarou sets off on a new adventure in the hope of shedding a few pounds but finds the odds stacked against him as a bunch of enemies attack, cruelly attempting to throw food into his mouth to keep his BMI high. Stay on the chubby side and Pentarou slows down, his attack reduced to a clumsy bellyflop. Lose weight and he can use more athletic abilities. It's a brilliantly inventive idea for a platform game, and used physical comedy as well as an emotional plot device to reinforce the bond between player and Pentarou.

Released exclusively in Japan in 1991, *Yume Penguin Monogatari* went unnoticed by all but the most clued in importers, only rising to cult status in the emulation age. By then, however, Pentarou was much better known for a different series of games – the *Gradius*-based comedy shoot-'em-up *Parodius*. Launched in 1988 on MSX and followed by four sequels across multiple formats, the series featured a wealth of playable characters, both brand new and borrowed from classic Konami games of old.

Pentarou was one of a handful of characters to feature in the original *Parodius*, and went on to star in all but one of the sequels, including strategy-RPG spin-off *Paro Wars*. As well as making cameo appearances in Konami's NES crossover series *Wai Wai World*, he has also been revived for a couple of modern games, such as iPhone's *Krazy Kart Racers* and DS's *New International Track & Field*, making him one of the publisher's most prolific guest stars. And if all of these appearances can convince players to go back and try his original games, then this can only be a good thing.



>. MAGIC MOMENTS

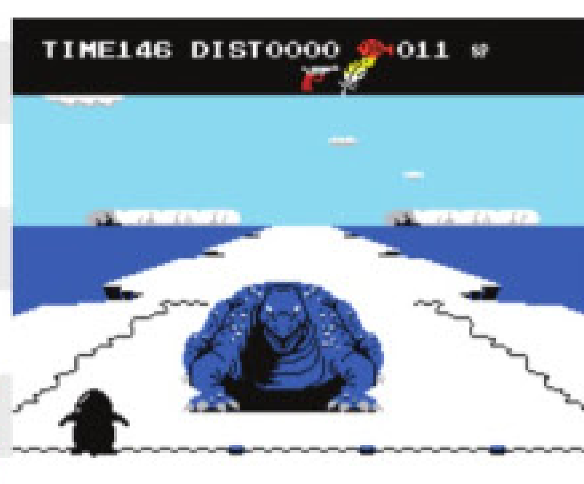


■ Pentarou's debut appearance was okay but nothing special. It attracted very little attention.



■ The title screen to *Penguin Adventure*. One of the most heart wrenching screens in 8-bit history.


■ *Penguin Adventure* is packed full of fun secrets, like this flight through space.


■ *Penguin Adventure*'s boss battles required you break the ice and send a dragon to his demise.


■ Beat the boss and Pentarou is joined by a troupe of dancing penguin friends to celebrate.



■ The opening to *Yume Penguin Monogatari* finds our hero overweight and under-loved.


■ Losing weight isn't easy when distant volcanoes try to fire rice cakes directly into your mouth.


■ Pentarou has enjoyed a revival lately. Perhaps we could have *Penguin Adventure Rebirth* next?

PENTAROU AND FRIENDS

Pentarou was one of the few stars of the original Parodius on MSX and went on to feature in nearly all of the sequels. But he wasn't the only Konami mascot to feature in the highly popular Gradius parody. Here we detail every major playable character to have appeared in the games, both original and classic…

KONAMI CODE



■ **1. Belial** - A female counterpart to Parodius's octopus star Takosuke.

■ **2. Ebisumara** - The sidekick to Goemon (of *Mystical Ninja* fame) appears as a player character in *Fantastic Parodius* on SNES.

■ **3. Goemon** – The star of *Mystical Ninja* appeared in the very first *Parodius* and then disappeared again, only to reappear in the SNES version of *Fantastic Parodius*.

■ **4. Hanako** – The player 2 version of Pentarou, similar to the girlfriend in *Penguin Adventure* and *Yume Penguin Monogatari*.

■ **5. Hikaru** – This rocket-riding bunny girl is an original *Parodius* creation and an influence on the stars of *Parodius* spin-off *Otomedius*.

■ **6. Ivan** – Though Pentarou is sadly absent from 1996's *Sexy Parodius*, he is replaced by Ivan – a green emperor penguin with a mean attitude. He sports an aggressive looking combat jacket in the cut-scenes.

■ **7. Kid Dracula** – From the game of the same name, this is actually *Castlevania*'s Alucard as a child. Only appears in the SNES version of *Fantastic Parodius*.

■ **8. Koitsu** – Another original *Parodius* creation. This one is simply a stick man riding a paper plane. Very odd.

■ **9. Mambo** – Made specifically for *Parodius*, this robot fish is presumably a reference to Taito's *Gradius* competitor, *Darius*. The player two variant is a re-coloured sprite called Samba.

■ **10. Michael** – A pig with wings and a halo. A reference to the 'pigs might fly' lunacy of the series, perhaps?

■ **11. Mike** – Mike is a cat that appears only in the console-only *Chatting Parodius*.

■ **12. Option** – Only playable in *Sexy Parodius*, Option is, yes, the option power-up from *Gradius* but re-imagined as a playable character.

■ **13. Pentarou** – Our favourite *Parodius* character appears in nearly all of the games, but is mysteriously absent from *Sexy Parodius*.

■ **14. Popolon** – Popolon was the hero of the *Knightmare* trilogy on MSX. He only appears in the very first, MSX-exclusive *Parodius*, naturally.

■ **15. Ran** – Another cat character who appears alongside Mike in *Chatting Parodius*. We like the way he's always curled up.

■ **16. Rupa** – Appearing alongside his brother Upa in two *Parodius* games, this baby originates in the obscure *Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa* – a Japan-only Famicom shooter that has since been released in the West via Virtual Console.

■ **17. Shooting Star** – This *Gradius*-esque ship appears in *Sexy Parodius* with a player 2 alternative named Black Viper.

■ **18. Sue** – One of the many original chracters to be introduced in *Chatting Parodius*, Sue and her counterpart Memim are fairies that feature prominently on the game's box art.

■ **19. Takosuke** – The mascot of the *Parodius* series, Takosuke was the first character made for the series, and is based on the cartoon octopus seen outside Japanese seafood restaurants.

■ **20. Twinbee** – The star of one of Konami's other great shooting games. His, and counterpart Winbee's, silly nature make the mascot perfect for the comedy of Parodius.

■ **21. Vic Viper** – As *Parodius* is a parody of *Gradius*, it makes sense for that game's iconic ship to feature. Vic Viper is the only playable chracter to feature in every *Parodius* game.

BEHIND THE SCENES

MR DRILLER

Namco's unique arcade game might be best described as 'what it's like to be inside Tetris' but, as producer Hideo Yoshizawa tells us, its true inspiration was a world away from the original block-dropper



Released: 1999
Format: Arcade, PlayStation, Dreamcast
Publisher: Namco
Developer: Namco

KEY STAFF:
Hideo Yoshizawa Producer
Yasuhito Nagaoka Director
Masanori Higashi Programmer
Yoshikazu Hato Programmer

WITH BUDGETS IN the tens of millions of dollars, 100-plus-sized teams and three-to-five-year development cycles on today's biggest videogames, it takes a brave company to start work on an idea without careful planning, market assessment and prototyping in advance of full development. Yet great games are occasionally developed in secret, built up to a certain level before they're shown to the managers of a studio for approval… games that might not sound much fun from a mere description, but turn out to be supremely playable once you get your hands on them. It's a fact that we're sure Namco's long-serving producer Hideo Yoshizawa would agree with, after the team behind 1997's *Klonoa* surprised him with an idea involving falling blocks of dirt and a little guy with a drill.

"It's not a rare occasion to unofficially start making a game with an instinctively thought-up idea and using a programmer that isn't busy," he admits. "I was actually the manager at that time and, when I was walking through Namco's offices, one of the creators suddenly told me to try playing it. When I first saw it, I thought it was something similar to *Tetris*, but I soon became addicted to it – and the next minute I realised that I had already been playing for three hours. I became very excited and told the creator how brilliant the idea was, and decided to produce it."

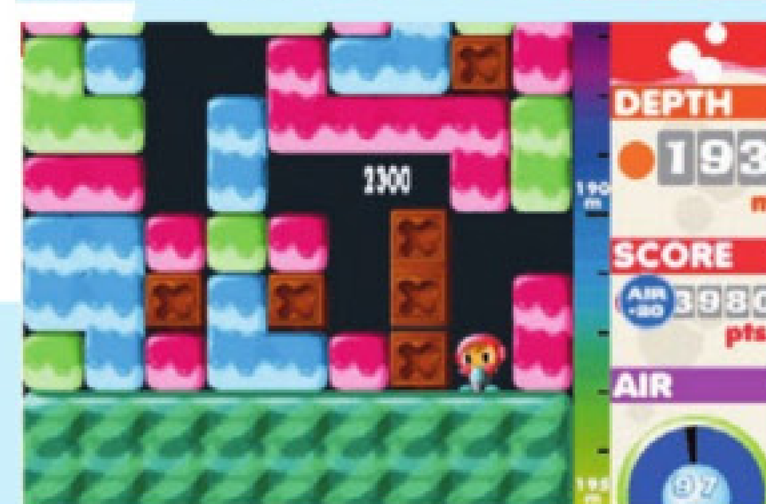
If Yoshizawa first thought that *Mr Driller* was derivative of *Tetris* then he wasn't the only one. There are key similarities between the two games, not least the fact that both involve various angular shapes falling from the top of the screen and linking together before disappearing. The big difference, of course, is that in *Mr Driller* you didn't control the blocks themselves, but the little character caught in between them, with his drill used to break a path through the blocks to the safety below. And as Yoshizawa explains, the development team's inspiration CONTINUED >.

THE NEXT MINUTE I REALISED THAT I HAD ALREADY BEEN PLAYING FOR THREE HOURS

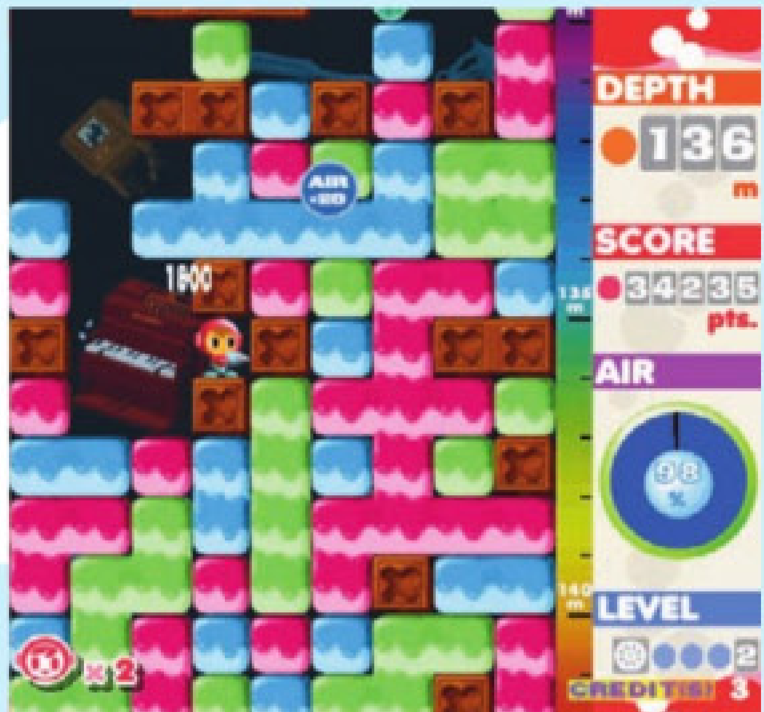


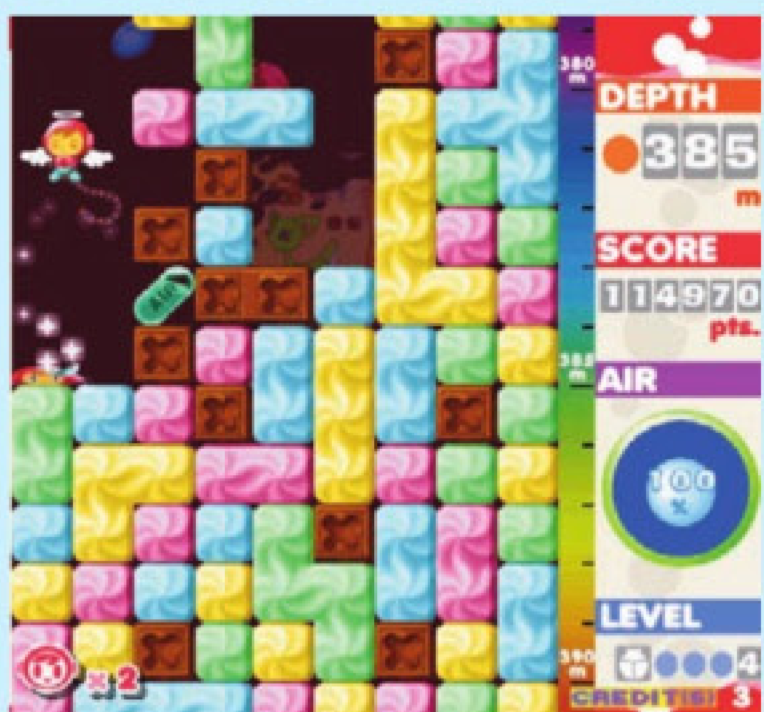


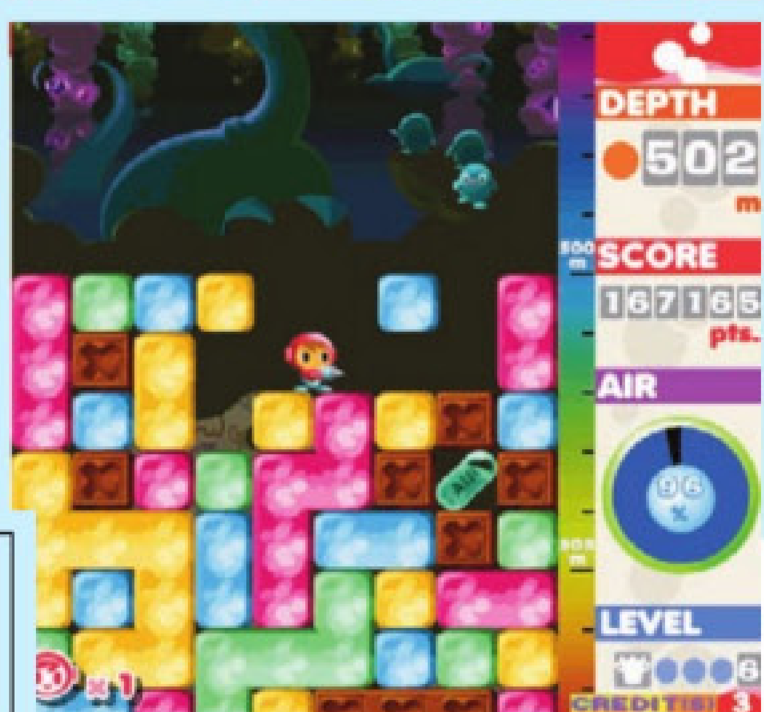
Mr Driller is set in the year 20XX. A reference to *Mega Man* perhaps? "We've never even thought of that before now," admits Yoshizawa.







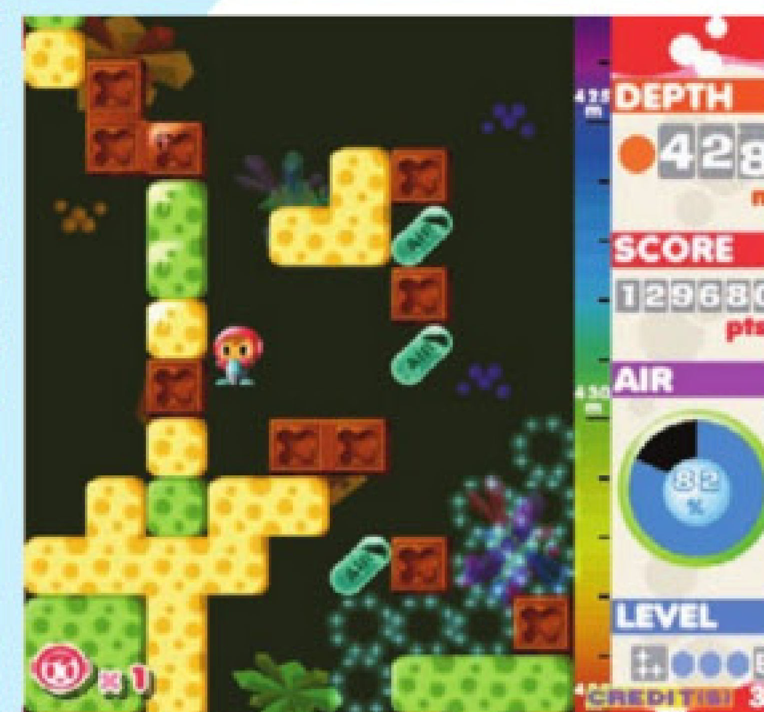


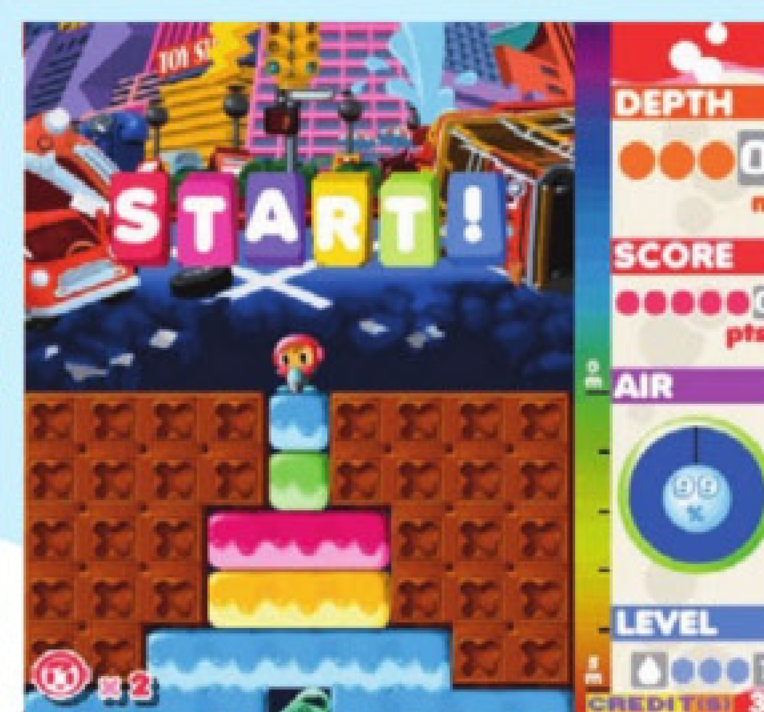


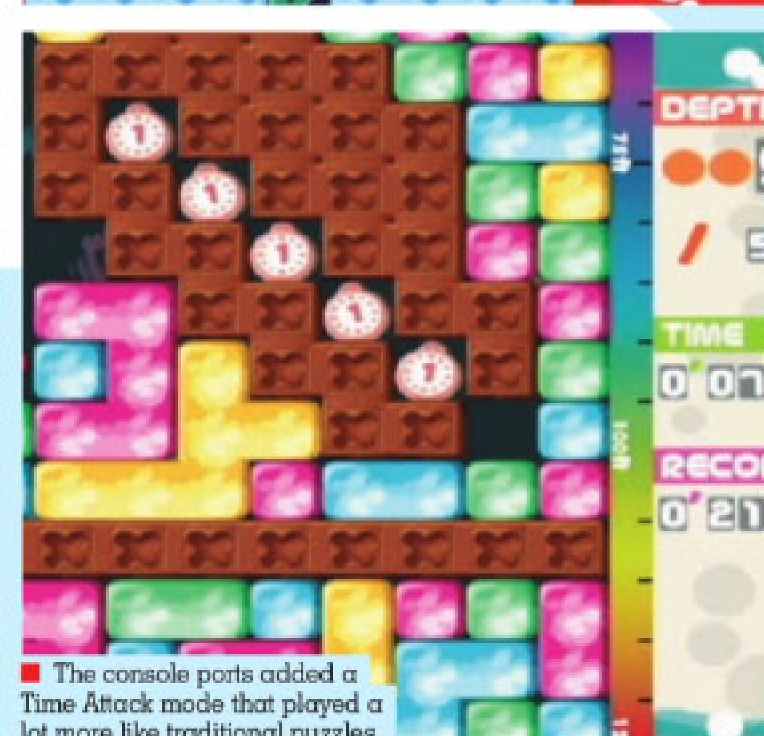




While the arcade version allowed you to choose between 500m and 1000m modes, the console ports and sequels quickly expanded the possible well depths available.

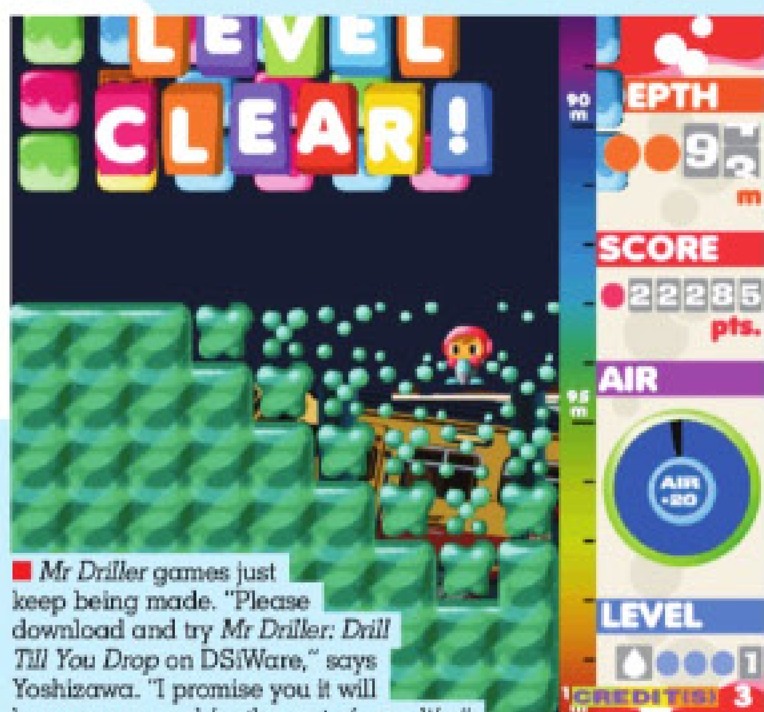




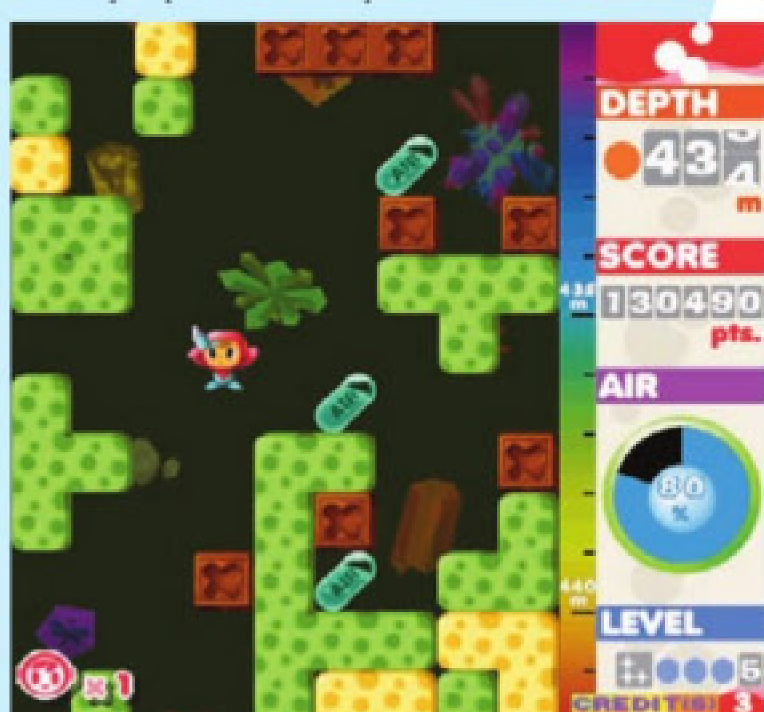


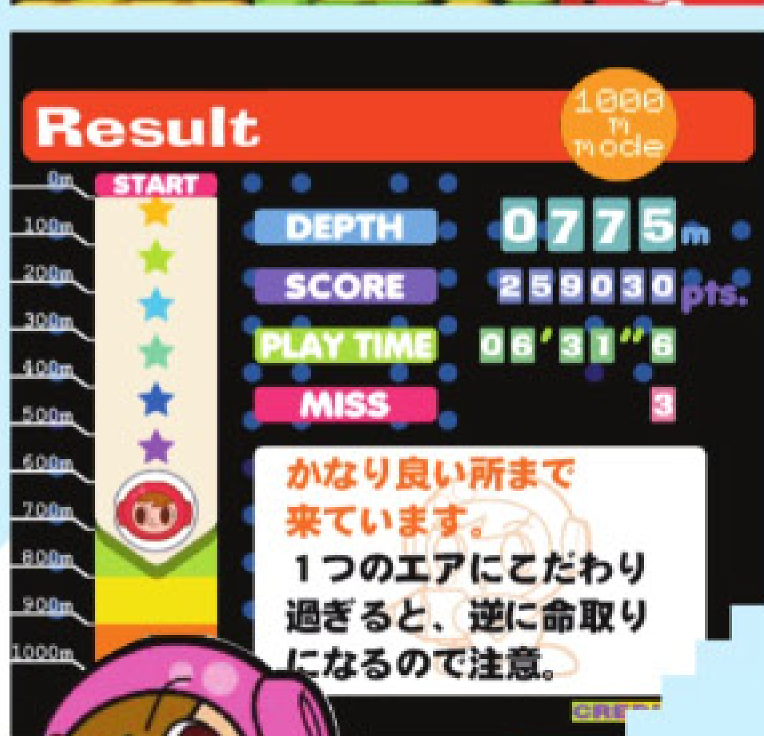
The console ports added a Time Attack mode that played a lot more like traditional puzzles.





Mr Driller games just keep being made. "Please download and try *Mr Driller: Drill Till You Drop* on DSiWare," says Yoshizawa. "I promise you it will become your pal for the rest of your life."





FROM THE **FORUM**

Posted by: ANDY KUROSAKI
Love *Mr Driller*, it's one of those games you play for a few minutes, only to find hours have shot past. That tense feeling when your air is low, and you're frantically trying to reach an O2 tank. Brilliant.

Posted by: FATBOYSLICK
Played it on emulation and never really got it. I could get so far but ended up dying for what seemed like unfairness.

Posted by: BIZARREKAL
Loved the first game. The only way to play it is fast – with the 'X' blocks chasing you all the way down!

Posted by: EMALDER
Mr Driller: probably one of my favourite game franchises of all time, and one of the few games that still makes the air turn blue every time I play it. Sometimes the simplest ideas are the best.

Posted by: THEVULTURE
Came to the game late – picked up DC version a few months back. Not bad, but a little overrated I feel. Simple concept, that works well, with a good 'just one more go' factor, but just missing something to make it a timeless classic.

Posted by: FAMICOM69
I picked up the GBC version a few months ago and was instantly hooked. Definitely up there with *Tetris*.

Posted by: GIGAPEPSIMAN
I had the PlayStation demo. It was pretty good, and, with the option of both 500m and 1000m, there was no need to buy the full game (though I wanted to anyway).



■ After all these years we still don't really understand the story of *Mr Driller*. What are all these things doing at the bottom of the well?

Susumu Hero

■ GIVEN THE cutesy appeal of Susumu Hori's character design, we can't help but ask Yoshizawa why Namco has never expanded the *Mr Driller* universe into other types of games, particularly mascot platform games, in the same way developers have done with *Pac-Man* in the past. "I would like to make one if I was given the opportunity to," he surprisingly reveals. "I actually have some ideas, such as making various vehicles move using the drill or flying through the skies by putting an airscrew on his drill." Sounds good to us, Yoshizawa-san. Please start making it now.

was actually so far away from *Tetris* that they weren't even inspired by videogames at all. "The first triggers of the idea came from traditional games Japanese children play," he outlines. "One is called 'Bo-taoshi', where you make a pile in a sandbox and thrust a stick into the top of it. You then take turns to prune away the sand from the pile and the one who makes the stick fall is the loser. Another is called 'Shogi-kuzushi', where you make a pile of Japanese chess pieces and take turns taking the pieces one by one. Just like Bo-taoshi, the one that makes the pile fall loses. While watching these games, we thought it would be thrilling to actually be inside these games, with the sand or chess pieces falling in at you."

The team predicted, quite rightly, that trying to survive the experience of being caught inside all of these falling blocks would be a rather thrilling one for the player. "We were thinking about these kinds of traditional games and imagining ourselves in a situation like an avalanche, where the way in which the pieces collapse can be estimated, but then when it actually does collapse, something unexpected occurs. Creating this snowball effect fit very well with the puzzle game elements, and I feel that if we were thinking of making a puzzle game from the beginning, then we wouldn't have brought up the idea of directly controlling a character."

■■■ DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE, *Mr Driller*'s gameplay is about more than just drilling your way to the bottom. You have to take regular detours, for example, to fill up the main character's ever-dwindling oxygen supply, while it's often necessary to keep track of which colour blocks are around you. If four of a kind join together, then they'll disappear and potentially cause chain reactions as those blocks above them drop down. This opens up pathways to the bottom, of course, but it also creates a huge risk, allowing other stray blocks to fall onto our hero and crush him to death. Keep an eye on those coloured blocks, however, and you can cleverly predict which ones will stick together *without* disappearing and causing chaos, leaving you with a nice safe passage to climb down.

Remembering all of these elements and more is essential for score-attack players intent on reaching the bottom of either a 500m or 1000m game with every extra life intact and every single air capsule collected. And it's because of all these elements – the oxygen, the falling blocks, the unbreakable blocks – that *Mr Driller* becomes such an addictive game. It's a balance that took an awful lot of iteration to achieve, according to Yoshizawa. "At first the game was endless," he reveals, "but I felt it should have a greater sense of accomplishment, so we made improvements that would perfect the game." The team added a separation every 100 metres, in order to give the player a sense of progress as well as to vary the arrangement of the game's elements. And after realising the unbreakable blocks could halt the game (should the main character become surrounded by them), the team allowed these blocks to be broken by five drill strikes at the cost of a small amount of oxygen.

AT FIRST IT WAS ENDLESS, BUT I FELT IT SHOULD HAVE A GREATER SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

Yoshizawa mentions that each level of the well only ever uses either two or four different coloured blocks at once, and that experiments with other numbers wreaked havoc with the gameplay. "If we made them five colours," he says, "then chains didn't occur often enough and it became difficult to make the blocks collapse. So we kept the number at four colours. Just as a test, we also made one mission that used only one colour, but they all disappeared with a single dig so we didn't use that either."



Iteration on the *Mr Driller* concept continued much longer than anticipated, as location tests threw up problems with the game that Namco could not have predicted. "When we first tried the game out at the game centre, the goal of usual puzzle games, like *Tetris*, was to erase the blocks. So many players were trying to erase all of the blocks and not dig to the bottom. From there we had to make several revisions, such as adding panels that mention that players should dig to the bottom, making the remaining air glow light to warn players that they would suffocate without collecting enough air capsules. After all these revisions, players finally realised that the game's goal was to dig to the bottom."

■■■ IF THE GAME of *Mr Driller* constantly evolved during the development process, then it might not be surprising to hear that the character of Mr Driller did too. In fact, even over a decade later, you might not realise that the main character isn't called Mr Driller at all, but is actually named Susumu Hori, in reference to Taizo Hori, the main character of Namco's other classic digging game, 1982's *Dig Dug*.

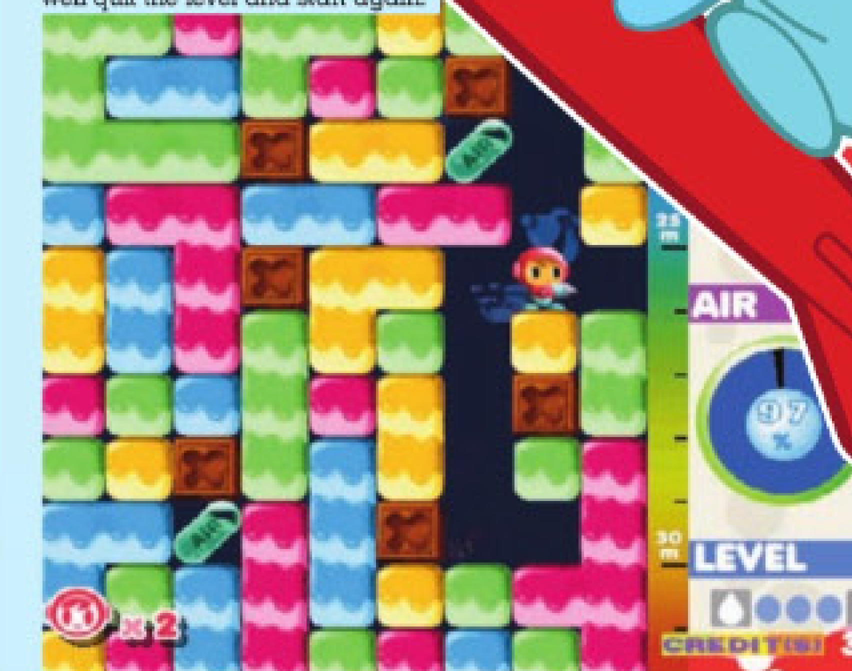
"There were various character designs along the way," says Yoshizawa. "There were designs such as a tall character, a baby, and even an animal. But at one point, the character became Susumu's design; when I saw only his face shown on the title screen I felt this was it. What was nice was that, if we were to put it in the arcade game at the time, looking at the character I felt a certain strange feeling because the picture was different and would stand out. I felt that it was actually more fun."

Before the character of Susumu was fully designed, Namco was in fact using the Taizo Hori sprite from *Dig Dug* as a placeholder in the prototype. "Along the way, Susumu's design was made, and he was supposed to be a young boy so he naturally became the son of the main character in *Dig Dug*," reveals Yoshizawa. It's a reference that goes over the heads of most players, but is one that Namco has nevertheless built upon over the years. Taizo Hori has appeared as a playable character in the series since 2001's *Mr Driller G*, while Susumu returned the favour by making a cameo in the 2005 DS game *Dig Dug Digging Strike*.

Despite debuting just as the arcade scene was beginning to die off, *Mr Driller*'s mix of puzzle and action mechanics made it a firm favourite with a certain type of gamer, and home console ports quickly followed for PlayStation and Dreamcast, in addition to PC, Game Boy Color and Wonderswan conversions. These initial ports concentrated on retaining the score-attack challenge that made the arcade original so compelling, but some of them also added a Time Attack mode that Yoshizawa personally oversaw. "To add that feature, we needed to make a fun stage structure with a certain fixed shape," he explains. "We were able to make ten variety-rich stages… It's really fun to play."

Many sequels naturally followed over the next 11 years, the best of which is surely the Japan-exclusive *Mr Driller Drill Land*, a theme park-structured GameCube game that enables you to play several different variations on the classic game, including one that even incorporates RPG elements and boss battles. It's a truly inspired example of sequel design, but one that Yoshizawa remains quite humble about. "When we develop a sequel, it is how we will introduce a new gaming experience to the basic system that is the main consideration. We can only add new features that can be enjoyed by everyone no matter their skill level."

Yoshizawa puts *Mr Driller*'s enduring success down to the original idea's evergreen gameplay, which provides a slightly different experience every time and never grows boring. "Have you ever experienced being crushed just 20 metres before the goal because you instinctively went to collect air that you actually didn't need?" he asks. "People that have experienced this will never be able to quit. This game has that kind of magic to it."



■ Miss an air capsule in *Mr Driller* and you might as well quit the level and start again.

What they said...

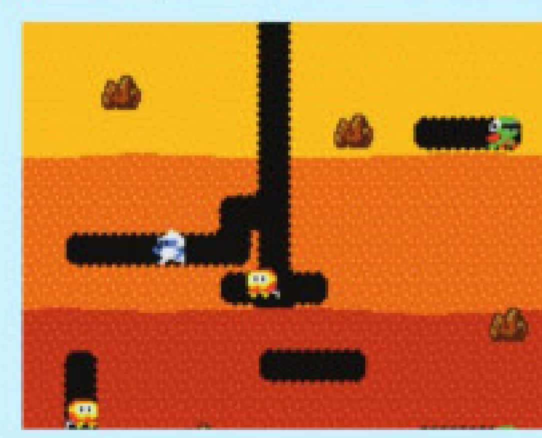


No matter how much we want to knock *Mr Driller*, we just can't – it's so addictive that even if we failed to complete the 5000m mode for the hundredth time, we'd come back for more.

Dreamcast Magazine, Issue 12



>. A Gaming Evolution



Mr Driller's basic ideas evolved from the primitive-but-much-loved digging gameplay of Namco's 1982 coin-op *Dig Dug*.



Team Driller has rarely deviated from the *Mr Driller* template, but did make a cool arcade/iPhone spin-off in the form of *Star Trigon*.



CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: N/A
Publisher: Atari
Developer: In-house

TEMPEST

ORIGINAL RELEASE **Board:** Atari Vector Hardware **Year:** 1981 **Publisher:** Atari **Developer:** In-house

ONE OF ATARI'S most original and challenging arcade shooters, *Tempest* actually started life as a first-person spin on *Space Invaders*, titled 'Vortex', before its creator, Dave Theurer, adapted it into the classic 'tube shooter' it became.

The story goes that after Theurer had finished an early build of his 3D *Space Invaders* project, senior management at Atari decided against the idea. It was then the *Missile Command* creator came back to them with an idea for an original game, the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

Coming to him in a dream, Theurer envisioned *Tempest*: a game in which players blasted abstract monsters while staring down a series of tunnels forming different geometric shapes divided into channels. Essentially turning the concept of *Space Invaders* on its head by having enemies come up from the ground, *Tempest* proved immensely popular thanks to its combination of striking visuals, originality and cathartic gameplay. Owing to its success, Atari put two conversions of the game into production: a version for the 2600 and another for the 5200. But neither reached beyond prototype stage before getting cancelled.

Though a prototype, and therefore unfinished, the 2600 version recently appeared in the line-up of games on the *Atari Greatest Hits Collection*. A highly ambitious conversion, expecting the 2600 to cope with a frenetic into-the-screen vector arcade shooter like *Tempest* was far beyond optimistic. Unable to create complex geometric vector shapes with any kind of clarity, as you can clearly see, the best the poor 2600 could muster up was a single shape that resembled a pair of underpants woven with block bitmaps the size of breezeblocks.

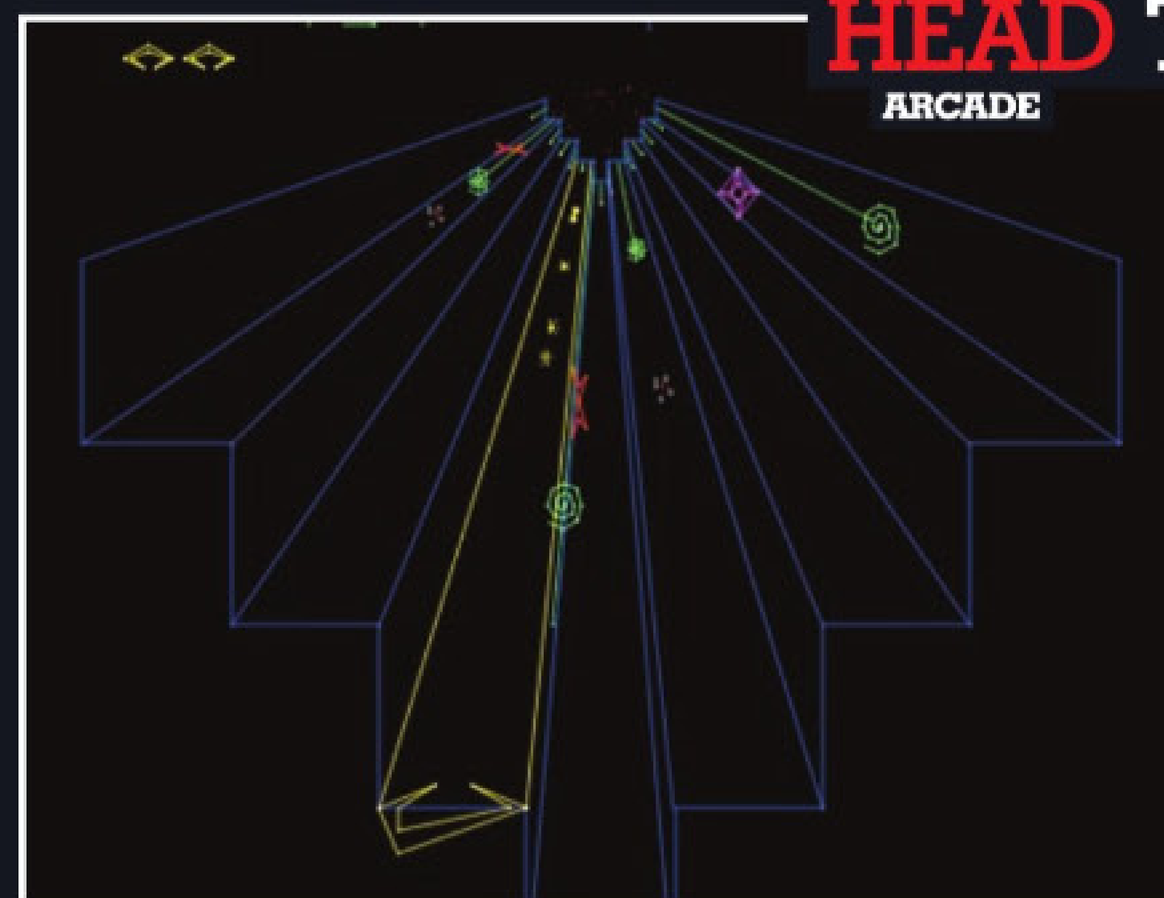
Where this conversion really fails, however, is in its gameplay. Moving and shooting feels extremely imprecise owing to a combination of bitmaps (even the inert ones) constantly flickering like the game is running on hopes and prayers, and the black and blue stripe design on the pants failing to correspond with the actual channels that your ship stops at and shoots down as it moves around the playing field.

A conversion that should never have been attempted, that Atari realised its mistake speaks volumes of how bad *Tempest* on the 2600 was shaping up to be.

Remember, this is the same company that signed off the console's *Pac-Man* port; its bar for quality was set so low that a game would have to be unthinkably bad not to make it to shelves.

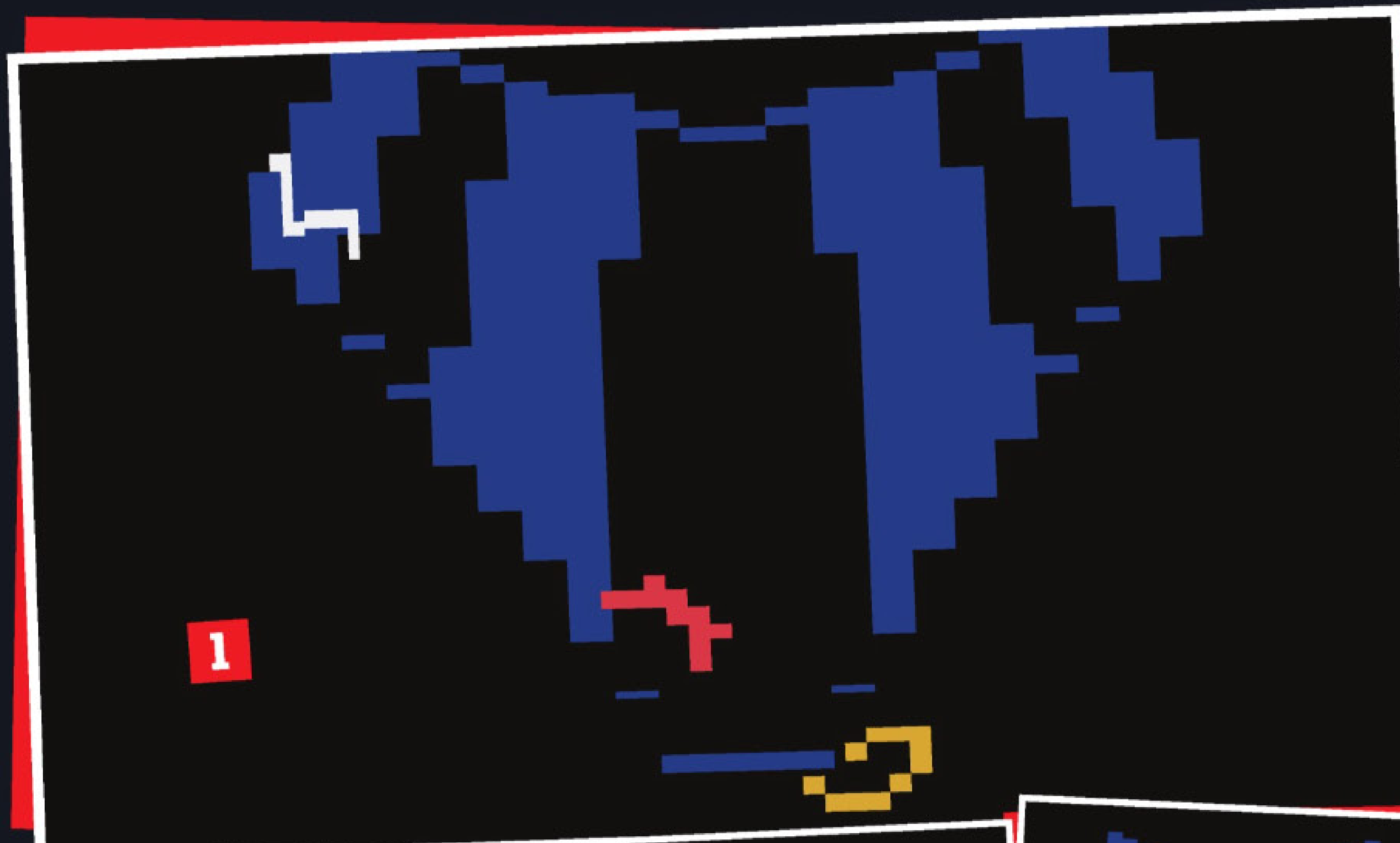
HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



ATARI 2600





THE BREAKDOWN





1 To say that this conversion is completely pants is actually true on two levels. The arcade game featured 16 different geometric stages to master; in this port you get just one – a shape that resembles a pair of ugly-looking Y-fronts. Ironic just isn't the word.

2 Amazingly, Atari managed to squeeze nearly all of the enemy types into the 2600 version. While they look like indefinable blobs of colour, they do act and attack in the same manner as they do in the original (sort of). It's about the only impressive thing about this port.

3 The worst thing about this conversion isn't how ugly it looks, or even how unresponsive the controls are, but how the thing plays. Shooting enemies is less about skilful timing and precision aiming and more a case of blind luck, owing to the aiming channels not corresponding with the visuals.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: CPC **Year:** 1986 **Publisher:** Electric Dreams Software **Developer:** In-house



It took a surprisingly long time for official home conversions of *Tempest* to emerge, and when they did fans weren't exactly spoiled for choice. The best of them was the acceptable CPC and Spectrum conversion released by Electric Dreams, which wasn't staggeringly faithful to the coin-op but did at least offer a decent replica of its original gameplay.

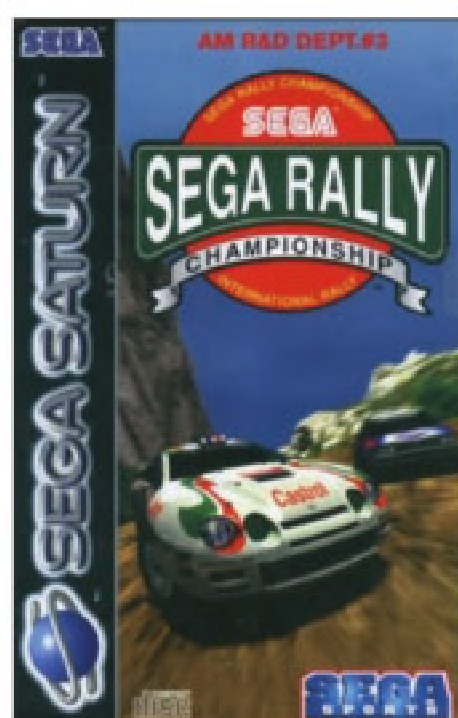




BEHIND THE SCENES

SEGA RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Tetsuya Mizuguchi might be best known for musically inclined titles like Space Channel 5 and Rez, but the designer rose to fame thanks to a different kind of sound – the roar of an engine and a cry of 'Game Over, Yeeeeaah!'



Released: 1994
Format: Arcade, Sega Saturn
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sega AM-3

KEY STAFF:
Tetsuya Mizuguchi
Producer
Kenji Sasaki
Director
Ryuichi Hattori
Lead programmer (Sega Saturn version)
Takenobu Mitsuyoshi
Sound composer

IN THE 16 years since *Sega Rally Championship*'s release, the evolution of the racing genre has been explosive. The contrast between a racing game now and a racing game then is so enormous that evaluating the impact that Sega's once-dominant racing trifecta – *Virtua Racing*, *Daytona USA*, and *Sega Rally Championship* – had on the industry could fill volumes. A quick recap reminds us that *Virtua Racing* brought the polygons, and that *Daytona USA* (itself the most successful arcade game of all time) brought a colourful, adrenaline-charged racer with a distinctive soundtrack and fantastic multiplayer competition. But *Sega Rally*... *Sega Rally* was altogether different. Not only did it usher in the era of the drift, but it did so in compelling fashion, offering a focused, minimal feature set that makes the racing games of today look excessive to a fault.

Born in an era of arcade dominance, when videogame consoles were still playing second fiddle to the powerful coin-crunchers of the time, *Sega Rally* represents the peak of Sega's arcade reign. Although the balance of power would soon shift to consoles, thanks to the emergent PlayStation, by the mid-Nineties Sega had ushered in the Golden Age of arcade classics. If Sega's silver age was represented by *Hang-On*, *Afterburner* and *Space Harrier*, then the vanguards of the new wave were surely *Virtua Fighter 2*, *Daytona USA*, *Sega Rally* and *Virtual-On*. In terms of racing, once past *Sega Rally*, arcade racing would only occasionally CONTINUED >.

I WAS YOUNG, WITH NO EXPERIENCE, BUT ALSO NO FEAR, SO I SAID, 'LET'S GO!'





Sega Rally was the first game to feature variable handling based on the type of surface you were driving on.















Sega Rally was completed in ten months with 12 people. Its successor, *Sega Touring Car Championship*, was done in less than five.







Winning the race in World Championship mode, which ran all three available tracks end-to-end in one staged rally event, opened up *Sega Rally*'s fourth track, Lakeside.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by: RAINLEVEL
It was brilliant, proved by the fact that it's the only game that still exists in arcades.

Posted by: UNICRON
Ahh, *Sega Rally*; it was the first racing game I ever played that I enjoyed. I remember ruthlessly honing my drifting skills on the first track and finally unlocking the Lancia Stratos, one of the best cars in any racing game ever. I still have it to this day, and two weeks ago I got it out for my three-year-old boy to play. Once he got the hang of it he really enjoyed it too… start 'em young, and all that.

Posted by: BIG MEAN BUNNY
The reason I got a Saturn, the reason that if my house was on fire the only thing I would go back inside for is my Saturn! Two cars, three tracks (Lakeside doesn't count), no needless boring levels of detail, sublime handling, fantastic music, and the unrivalled pinnacle of 'just one more go to try and beat my time' racing.

Posted by: MFNICK
My mates used to go on about the superiority of their PlayStations because their racing game had more than two or three cars and three or four tracks. Yet I kept playing *Sega Rally* through the entirety of the Saturn's lifespan and beyond, while they got bored and traded in just about every racer they ever got. They had the quantity, *Sega Rally* had the quality.

Posted by: TRESDOSS
First racing game I can remember where the handbreak was actually helpful… drifting past your mates on the dual-screened arcade cabinets never got old.



■ Despite Mizuguchi's love of techno music, he found it wasn't a suitable match for *Sega Rally*, and opted to go for a "rockier, funkier soundtrack."



duplicate, but not surpass the innovation and excitement of this on-and-off road drift king.

Enter Tetsuya Mizuguchi. By the time he began to assemble the team that would create *Sega Rally*, he had only one project at Sega under his belt, the long-forgotten AS-1 'Motion Ride' title *Megalopolis*, itself more of a *Blade Runner*-inspired CG-movie-theme-park-style ride than a proper game. Created with the help of then-programmer/now film director Michael Arias (who recently directed the anime hit *Tekkonkinkreet*), *Megalopolis*'s hydraulic cabinet enclosure gave Mizuguchi the experience he would need to envision the high-production off-road experience his team would create for *Sega Rally*. While *Megalopolis* was created by a team of only five people, including Mizuguchi and Arias, the Sega Rally team would more than double in size to a 12-member staff (although by this time Arias had returned to the States to move into film production).



TETSUYA MIZUGUCHI
Producer

■■■ *MEGALOPOLIS* PROVIDED A great deal more experience to the team than just an understanding of arcade cabinets and hydraulic systems. It also marked the first project within Sega that specialised in the burgeoning field of CGI, particularly textured CG graphics. Mizuguchi remembers: "That was so tough a project, because nobody knew about CGI. 'What is a digital movie?' We learned a lot. At Sega there was no staff like that specialised in it. All the staff at Sega, they just wanted to make a game. But this was the first visual expression project for Sega."

After the [Sega arcade centre] Joypolis-exclusive *Megalopolis* project was finished, Mizuguchi began thinking about his next project. It wasn't until a trip to Sega's European offices that the kernel for *Sega Rally* would be formed. "I wanted to make a racing game," Mizuguchi continues, "but I had to think about what the concept would be, and what the differences would be. [On a trip to Europe] I met up with people from Sega France, Sega Italy. I asked them – remember I was a new face at the time, so I didn't know so much about the industry at first – I asked them for their inspirations and their opinions. 'What kind of game do you want? What kind of vision do you have?' Most of the people had complained to Sega headquarters that they only watched the American market, for example, things like *Daytona*. So Sega of Europe people were complaining about this, but they didn't have the answers either.

"So I was watching a TV program, a sports channel, and I watched rally racing live. That was my first experience watching that. I said, 'What is this?' My original idea of rally racing was of the Paris to Dakar rally, with trucks, which is very different. But the WRC [World Rally Championship] is raced using regular cars you can buy; Toyota, Lancia. Many, many cars, cool stickers, driving into cities and forests, there are many people on the side of the road, including old people and young kids, female, male. It was like a festival, so passionate. Then it occurred to me: 'Let's make a rally game.' *Daytona* was limited to circuits – grey circuits. But with rally we could design many landscapes; nature, cities, desert. So we decided to make a rally game. That was the start."

Despite the inspiration and unique angle on the racing genre, Sega management wasn't initially keen on the idea. In fact, they rejected it. Sega HQ apparently felt that none of the arcade games that had previously touched upon the rally experience had ever been big enough hits to justify developing an expensive then-generation arcade rally racer. "[They had] kind of a prejudice against rally games," Mizuguchi explains. "Sure, many rally games existed, but every rally game was of the Paris/Dakar type, just set in the desert. I wanted to make a WRC-style game, but they didn't understand at all.

"So I made a demo movie, which I think was the first case it had been done in Sega. I made a three-minute movie, just an image movie, compositing a real rally game, rally racing. And Kenji Sasaki, *Sega Rally*'s director, he could make CGI movies too, so I made a composite mixture of desert, forest, jumps, sliding turns… very exciting. Then everybody changed their expressions and said 'Hmm.' But there were many arguments; for example, there's no oval. So I said 'what do you think?' They said 'No, no, no, let's make an oval rally course.' I thought we could make many, many stages – desert, city, forest, many colors, jumps, drifting, in rocky type environments. I felt I could make a very passionate new racing game, but it was a big battle."

■■■ ANOTHER MAJOR CHALLENGE Sega's young producer encountered was major resistance to using licensed cars, now a given in any modern racing game. When you consider that Sony's upcoming, four-years-in-the-making *Gran Turismo 5* purports to boast over a thousand cars, it really puts things in perspective when you consider *Sega Rally*'s carefully selected two licensed rally cars, the Toyota Celica and the Lancia Delta Integrale. But the hill Mizuguchi had to climb wasn't only propped up by the bean-counters at Sega, who didn't want to incur the costs associated with licensing real-world properties; he also had to convince both Toyota and Lancia that this was something they'd want to be a part of.

"I decided to visit Toyota, but this was a new thing. I was young, with no experience, but also no fear, so I said 'Let's go!' and I met with a Toyota PR manager. I was like a kid. I said, 'I want to make a rally game using your car.' I wanted to make a game using Toyota Celica and Lancia Delta, because they were both champion rally cars, but there was no synchronization [between the two manufacturers]. The Lancia Delta was a former champion car, and the Toyota Celica was the new champion car. But they never fought each other for the championship, so it was a fantasy setting to have two real champion cars fight in a virtual Sega rally race.

"So I went to Toyota. I brought the demo on a video tape. They hated videogames, because until then they thought videogames were a fake business. No publicity, no PR, so they really hated the videogame industry. But I went there and brought the *Sega Rally* demo – the first 3D demo with textures – and they were so surprised. They said, 'This is a game?'"

Through some tactical maneuvering, Mizuguchi was able to persuade Toyota to sign on with the project, provided that Lancia was also up for the deal. Traveling to Italy with video tape in hand, Mizuguchi went to Lancia and pitched them on the idea. Lancia liked it and CONTINUED >.

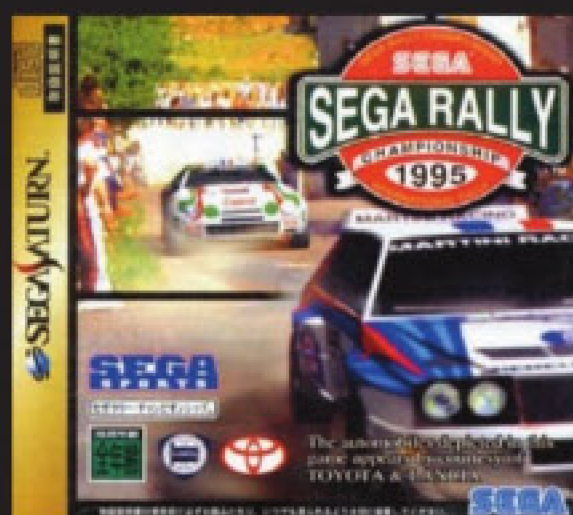
A Tale Of Two Packshots

The deeper meaning behind SRC's duelling covers

■ TO THE AVERAGE consumer there's nothing distinctly noteworthy about *Sega Rally Championship*'s cover art, apart from some nice layout and design, on either the original release or the repackaged XBAND-compatible *Sega Rally Championship Plus*. But closer inspection reveals a battle for more than just simple game package supremacy.

In the original release on Saturn, Lancia's Delta Integrale is in the lead, but the Toyota Celica is hot on its heels. In the re-release, the Celica has just overtaken the Delta by a nose, signalling the shift in power from one manufacturer to the other. It wasn't just about giving each car its due; it was also about creating a bit of drama where there wasn't any previously.

SRC producer Tetsuya Mizuguchi tells us: "The Lancia Delta was a former champion car, and the Toyota Celica was the new champion car. But they never fought each other for the championship, so it was a fantasy to have two real champion cars fight in a virtual Sega rally race. This was a big metaphor. This was paying respect to Lancia. The way the covers are designed on the two versions, it shows a continuing story between these two cars."



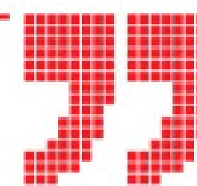


WHAT THEY SAID…



Sega's kind of scary. This 3D should not be possible on Saturn. Imagine the arcade game at half the resolution and frame rate… add a touch of pixelage and that's the Saturn version. And you have to buy *Rally* anyway, because you haven't lived until you hear 'Game Over, Yeah!'

GameFan, December 1995







I WANTED TO MAKE A WRC-STYLE GAME, BUT SEGA DIDN'T UNDERSTAND IT AT ALL

■ At the time, *Sega Rally* arcade units cost about as much as a real car, and yet Sega still sold around 12,000 of them. The special *DX* units, which came equipped with replica Celica bodies, were only distributed to Sega's own Joypolis centres.



The Things They Don't Teach You In School

Have you heard Sega Rally's secret voice?

■ NOWADAYS, EVERYTHING GAME-RELATED is well-documented in FAQs, cheat sites and message boards, but it's possible that even this little tidbit has escaped anyone's notice. Ryuichi Hattori, the lead programmer of the Sega Saturn version of *Sega Rally Championship*, says: "There was one feature that was not announced about the game, which was a sort of ranking system. I can't remember the specifics now. However, if the player achieved a fast time without hitting any walls, the DJ voice that played during the replay would be different. The lead sound guy was a good friend of mine, and we put this spec in without telling anyone else about it." So, *Sega Rally* vets. Have you discovered this subtle audio rarity?





■ One of the arcade version's real innovations, beyond all the hydraulics and widescreen monitors, was the subwoofer placed right beneath your tail, which would simulate the sound (and feel) of tiny stones rattling off your undercarriage during drifts.

signed up, allowing the producer to return triumphantly to Toyota to tell them the good news. It was at this point that the Celica was now ready to join the Delta Integrale in virtual battle on *Sega Rally*'s gritty courses.

Interestingly, *Sega Rally* wasn't always envisioned as *Sega Rally*. Originally, Mizuguchi's idea and inspiration almost resulted in a rally game called *Pacific Coast Rally*, based on California's famous, winding driver's heaven called The Pacific Coast Highway (PCH for short). "I felt we should use that area, so we went to San Francisco with five or six people. We had cameras for designers to shoot textures. We took two weeks to tour San Luis Obispo, Death Valley and Mexico. That was fun; it was like a road movie for a road-based videogame. We always had our meetings in our car. It was an organic process discussing what kind of stages to make. We had many, many inspirations.

"I had experienced that area before, but the young designers and artists didn't know about it, so I said, 'Let's go.'" In discussing how the project changed from *Pacific Coast Rally* to *Sega Rally*, Mizuguchi tells us that the key factor was using licensed cars. Putting real-world rally cars in an environment not known for rally racing didn't make sense. So the team opted to create locations that looked more appropriate, evoking a more European setting, although the game's forest stage was actually modelled after California.



But what is it that sets *Sega Rally* apart? What is it about this particular game that launched countless would-be rally kings like *Colin McRae*, *V-Rally*, *World Rally Championship* and, ironically, even Sega's own subsequent multi-platform updates to their series? *Sega Rally* innovated on numerous levels. It was one of the first big racing games to actually use licensed cars. It was also one of the first racing games to introduce drifting physics on multiple ground surfaces, including dirt and tarmac. It deviated from the typical formula of offering oval tracks, instead creating a series of sim-like segmented courses, each with its own characteristics. *Sega Rally* is also famous for its co-pilot (voiced by a *Sega Rally* dev team member), who, amusingly, prepares you for upcoming road conditions by uttering phrases such as 'Easy right, maybe!' *Sega Rally* was also quite difficult to complete, with tight time limits separating checkpoints. Not only was it tough to complete each stage within the allotted time, it was also of paramount importance to advance a certain number of places in the pack in order to come in first at race's end.

■■■ ENCOUNTERING OPPOSING CARS is also a rarity, unlike games like *Daytona USA*, where the player is always in the thick of it. The most significant factor, and one that points to the game's arcade origins, is that *Sega Rally*, from start to finish, lasted on average less than five minutes. Consider that! Tell any gamer weaned on today's feature-rich game content that there's this great racing game that's over in less than five minutes; he'd ask whether it's a free Flash game or a joke. But that's the length of a *Sega Rally* race, if not the *Sega Rally* experience.

As with most of Sega's arcade-to-console ports, the Sega Saturn port of *Sega Rally* offered minimal features beyond its Championship mode and Practice mode. Relying on its trend-setting controls, near-perfect difficulty curve and expertly designed courses, *Sega Rally* offered the perfect combination of ingredients for gamers to continually replay the game, master their technique, shaving precious seconds off their time.

Even the experience of 'losing' in *Sega Rally* is famous, thanks to the distinctive 'Game Over, Yeahhhhh!' jingle that plays when your time is up. That line, Mizuguchi tells us, was the idea of *Sega Rally* composer Takenobu Mitsuyoshi, the man who brought the world the impossibly enthusiastic *Daytona USA* songs 'Let's Go Away' and 'Sky High.'



■ The *Sega Rally* team went out and drove real rally cars to get a feel for how they really handled. Producer Tetsuya Mizuguchi even wrecked a Toyota Celica for his efforts.

■■■ THE ONE ACE up the Saturn version's sleeve that didn't exist in the arcade version was the inclusion of the famous Lancia Stratos. Mizuguchi recalls, "In the Seventies, this was the monster champion car. It's so nice. The Lancia Stratos was like a super-supercar. It was a classic, but everyone in Japan and Europe knew it. In Japan when I was a kid, there was a supercar boom, and everyone had rubber erasers shaped like cars. All the kids had many rubber cars, and everyone knew about this car, the name, the detail. So we wanted to put a big surprise in the Saturn version. I remember I put the Lancia Stratos' name in the last spot in the credits roll. The car was like an actor appearing in the game: 'Starring the Toyota Celica, Lancia Delta Integrale, aaaaaaand the LANCIA STRATOS.' Drama! Everyone was like 'What!?' And the next time you played you could select the Lancia Stratos."

> **MY ORIGINAL IDEA OF RALLY RACING WAS PARIS TO DAKAR, WITH TRUCKS, WHICH IS DIFFERENT**

In the end, after all the trials and tribulations, and an incredibly short ten-month development time, Sega rolled out over 12,000 units of the arcade version of the now-legendary *Sega Rally* (which recently appeared in its original form as a bonus disc on PS2, bundled with the newer but decidedly generic *Sega Rally 2006*) to arcade owners around the world. Sold as individual arcade units, in head-to-head 'Twin' competition configurations, and even in incredibly rare, Joypolis-only *DX* editions (complete with sit-in car), *Sega Rally* provided its parent company not only with another cutting-edge racing game to add to its stable, but also provided its fledgling Sega Saturn with another exclusive killer app. It also established the reputation of Tetsuya Mizuguchi, who would go on to revolutionize and kick-start another genre – the music game – with *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*.

While countless racing games have gone off-road since, including Sony's *Gran Turismo* series, which eventually included rally racing as an additional mode, few have ever approached *Sega Rally*'s pure, near-perfect racing package. Furthermore, as modern gamers demand quantity in addition to quality, it's doubtless we'll ever see the likes of a *Sega Rally* again. It's a game from a different era, and even Sega's own attempts to bring the series up to speed with modern expectations have seen the franchise lose a bit of what made it so special in the first place. But maybe, with Sega's focus on bringing arcade-perfect ports of older Model 2 games to XBLA and PSN, we will have a chance of hurtling through the dunes in a Toyota Celica or Lancia Delta Integrale once again.



■ We'd love the gang to get back together and create *Pacific Coast Rally*, the original idea behind what would become *Sega Rally*.



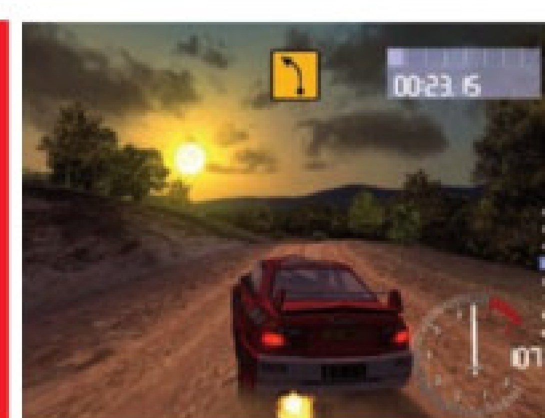
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

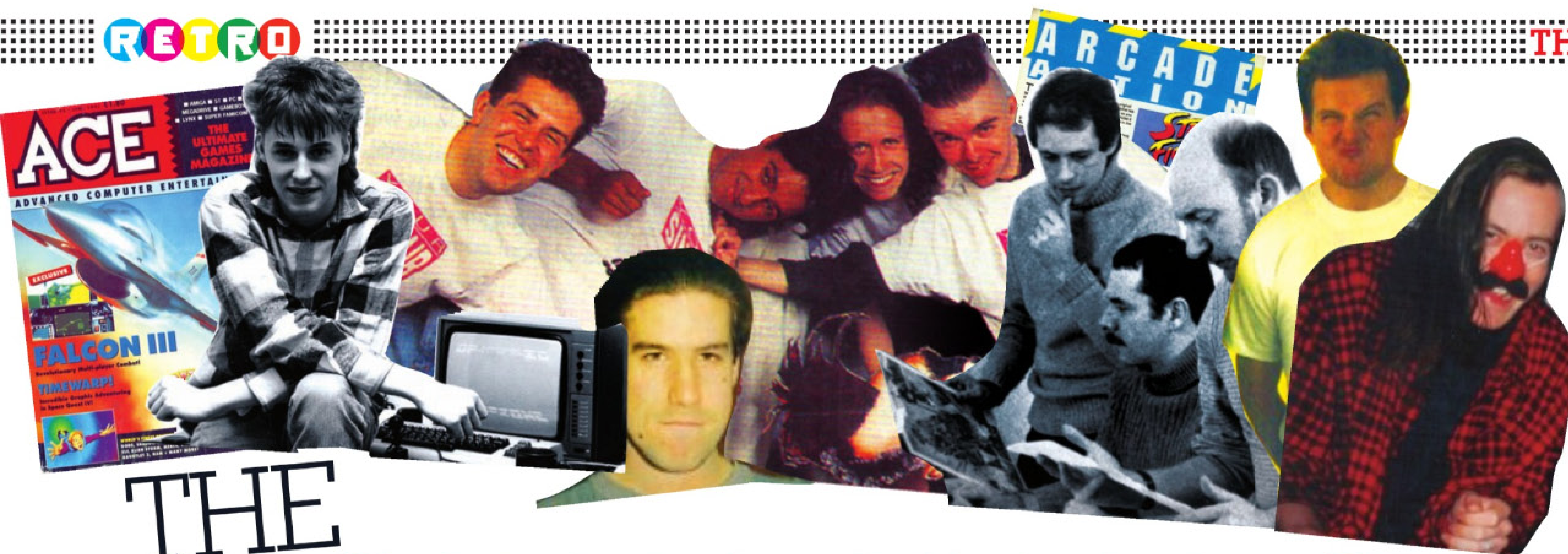


While far from a rally game, Sega's *Virtua Racing* pioneered the leap from overhead 2D racing into the world of three dimensions.



If any rally series did a bang-up job of carrying the torch that *Sega Rally* originally lit, it's Codemasters' ode to The Flying Scotsman.





THE GOLDEN AGE OF VIDEOGAMES JOURNALISM

games™ speaks to the most influential games journalists of the past 20 years and lifts the lid on the most exciting period in print media



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

GARY PENN

A legend in his own lunchtime, since leaving the field of videogame journalism, Penn has assisted such companies as Konami and Rockstar with game design, and currently works at Denki. In 2007 he was rightly awarded the UK Games Media Legend award.

Looking back over the past few decades, it's amazing to see how our beloved pastime has evolved from a humble bedroom hobby to a multi million-pound industry to rival Hollywood in terms of revenue. Predictably, other aspects of the business have also matured, including the process of writing about games. As each generation of hardware has come and gone, so too have countless magazines, each serving as a vital line of communication between developers and the people who ultimately pay their wages.

The magazine you hold in your hands is a direct result of years of journalistic evolution, the most significant period of which is the late-Eighties to early-Nineties. Often referred to as the 'Golden Era' of games journalism, this was a time when 8-bit gaming was amazingly popular and the rapidly emerging 16-bit technology was helping to develop some iconic brands on a par with the likes of Disney.

Getting a job on a videogame magazine during this period was more a question of luck than anything else, but talent and perseverance helped. "After winning *Computer & Video Games* magazine's National Arcade Championships and racking up some pretty monstrous record scores on games like *Defender*, *Asteroids* and *Missile Command*, I thought I'd try to capitalise on my success by writing hints-and-tips articles," says Julian 'Jaz' Rignall, the man behind many of publishing company EMAP's fondly remembered game mags. "I got them published in several magazines, including *C&VG* and *Personal Computer Games*. In early-1985 Newsfield Publications was about to launch *Zzap! 64*, a companion to its successful ZX Spectrum magazine, *Crash*. The firm was looking to give the magazine some 'street cred' and thought it would be a good idea to hire 'real' games players as reviewers, rather than leverage traditional journalists like those staffing most games magazines at the time. Thanks to my high-scoring notoriety and the fact that I was writing articles for his old magazine, I was one of the people hired, along with Gary Penn."

Penn, who went on to write for the highly respected multiformat magazine *Ace* before ending up at Scottish developer Genki, admits that his introduction to the world of videogame journalism was swift. "One minute I was sitting at home playing and sometimes making games and the next I was integral to the launch of a radically different new magazine," he begins.

"Thankfully I had an unparalleled knowledge and appreciation of games, a healthy enthusiasm, the ability to play and write about games, a dash of creativity and enough binding arrogance." *Zzap! 64*'s use of 'gamers' rather than traditional journalists was a bold move, but it proved to be a turning point in the history of UK game magazines. Rignall eventually left to join EMAP and edit *C&VG* – easily the biggest multiformat monthly of the era – where he in turn opened the door to more famous talent. "About six months before I did my A-Levels, I started to send off sample reviews to the likes of Newsfield and EMAP and got precisely zero response," recalls Richard Leadbetter. "Then, all of a sudden, about a week before my final exam, I had a call from Julian asking me to come in to interview. About six weeks after the interview, I got some freelance work and within 48 hours I'd been offered a full-time job." It's hard to imagine many publishers adopting such an approach today, but it worked. "Rignall's recruitment procedure was pretty foolproof: ignore all qualifications, read the work, get them in and see how much they know about games," says Leadbetter, who went on to edit *Mean Machines*, *Sega Saturn Magazine* and *Maximum*.

It's not just the enrolment procedure that is different from modern techniques; the work ethics of the early-Nineties were also somewhat unorthodox. "Basically we were incredibly unprofessional, but there was method in the madness," recalls Leadbetter. "We had a huge fanzine-type atmosphere in the office and in the way we went about our business. Entire weeks of the schedule could be lost playing *Street Fighter II* or *Super Mario Kart*, or disappearing down to Tottenham Court Road because we'd heard a new coin-op was on test. The *Mean Machines* office was exactly as you would imagine: it was a fantastic place to work, and this way of doing things was fine so long as we hit deadline, which, by and large, we did. So it was all a combination of working hard and playing hard, really, and it was all reflected in the stuff we used to put out. If we weren't putting all that time into playing games, the mags wouldn't have been as good as they were." Rignall has equally positive memories.

"We had an absolutely killer team," he reveals, "and we put together a magazine that was much loved by its readers, thanks to the fact that it didn't pull any punches," recalls Rignall. "Indeed, we deliberately tried to punch as hard as we could."

Around the same time that Rignall and his team were pushing the envelope at EMAP, a fresh-faced Stuart Campbell was plying his trade at the immensely popular *Amiga Power*. He shares similarly positive recollections of this time period. "We were working incredibly long hours and loving it," he recalls. "When I started on *Amiga Power* in 1991, I was on a ridiculously low wage – £8,000 a year if I remember rightly. But we'd regularly put in 16-hour days voluntarily because the job was so much fun. The corporate culture of those days is unrecognisable compared with what I hear about from full-time staffers today, there was far more creative and operational freedom back then. We were pretty much given the equipment and left to get on with it, and I think that shows in the diverse character of the magazines of the time. They weren't all good, but they sure as hell weren't all the same." CONTINUED >.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

PAUL GLANCEY

Glancey successfully plied his trade at EMAP till the mid-Nineties when he oversaw the launch of the excellent MegaTech. He then moved into game design and got a job as a game evaluator with Eidos before moving to Criterion to take up the position of senior producer and later created *Split/Second*.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

STUART CAMPBELL

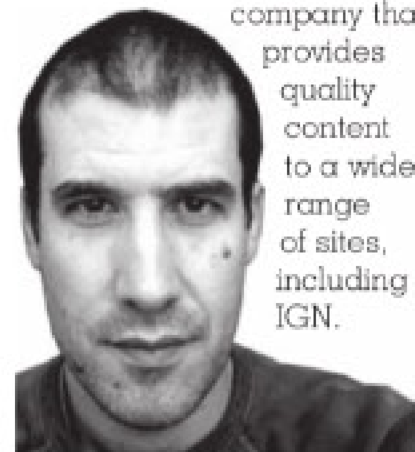
As well as being ranked as "the country's top authority on computer and videogames" (Wired.com), Campbell was also development manager at Sensible Software during 1994 and 1995. He continues to write freelance and even contributes top-notch content for us.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

PAUL DAVIES

After being unceremoniously ditched as *C&VG* editor after the fatal redesign of 1999, which eventually killed the magazine, Davies moved into freelance and has since established Unlikely Hero, a company that provides quality content to a wide range of sites, including IGN.



Nothing lasts forever, and while this period of unbridled passion for videogames helped launch the careers of many budding journalists, the middle of the decade brought with it a radical change in outlook. Sony PlayStation launched and suddenly the light-hearted and irreverent tone of most magazines didn't seem to fit in with the new 'cool' attitude sweeping through the industry. This change is being felt even today and as a result the average videogame publication is almost unrecognisable when compared with the likes of *Zzap! 64* or *Mean Machines*. "As the audience has got older, the most vocal elements of it have become far more cynical, and, unfortunately, writers have become accustomed to accommodating that audience, especially in the digital age when everyone has an opinion and a means to voice it," explains Leadbetter.

"Journalists can't champion a game any more without being accused of having an agenda. It's rather sad, but in some senses it's the culmination of big business taking over the lion's share of game journalism, and far too many dodgy review scores being doled out in exchange for 'exclusive' coverage. For us, editorial was never, ever compromised due to advertising concerns. To illustrate, a particularly odious PR man tried to pressure Jaz into giving a game a particular score. As soon as he got over the shock of what this guy was trying to do, Jaz literally threw him out of the door and told him never to come back." Paul Davies, who worked under the tutorage of Rignall and Leadbetter on EMAP's magazines, before eventually rising to edit *C&VG* during what was arguably its best era in the mid-Nineties, experienced this change first hand. "Games magazines have become more professional in outlook and I respect that things are better organised and 'targeted' at certain audiences," he comments. "However, the best magazine teams of the Nineties were recruited like rock bands or sports teams, everything had to click and I think this came across on the page. It seems to me that most of the sincerity and fun has been sapped from today's magazines because it's all about the big-money titles keeping the world turning, but this reflects the entire industry, not just the magazines."

AS THE AUDIENCE HAS GOT OLDER, THE MOST VOCAL HAVE BECOME FAR MORE CYNICAL

So, if the industry has evolved, has this resulted in a better standard of writing?



"Yeah, it definitely has, although it does depend on your definition of the term," states Rignall. "Magazines are all grown up and professional these days. But that also means that you don't see the kind of no-holds-barred crazy bullshit that we produced back in the day. You do see it on the web, yes, but not in magazines. Back then, we didn't really care about offending advertisers. To us, being credible and writing what we thought were honest opinions – and pushing the boundaries of what was tasteful and appropriate for videogame journalism – was all-important. Nowadays, there are far more considerations, people hold back a lot more and there is a lot less outright humour – perhaps because people are worried about trivialising what they're writing about, which might anger or offend the game companies. We never had those hang-ups. What we created might not have been as technically good as today's journalism, but I think it had a little more soul and was definitely a lot more entertaining and fun."

While the 'fun' aspect is often missing from print media these days, Campbell isn't so sure that overall quality has improved. "I think the likes of *Crash*, *Sinclair User*, *Zero* and most of the Amiga and ST magazines were aimed at a considerably older and less stupid reader than the idiot 14-year-old fanboys who seem to be today's target audience. The standard of the overwhelming amount of print games journalism I read now is absolutely appalling – it's either ignorant and totally cretinous faux-juvenile drivel with no value on any level, or so far up its own fundament with empty, meaningless pretension that I have to read it in the bathroom, because there's nothing in there that I can break when I hurl the magazine at the wall in violent contempt. That was often true in previous generations, of course, but I think the good stuff is much rarer and harder to find now."

As games have become more technically advanced, we've also experienced a change in the depth of the average videogame. Has this increased complexity made a reviewer's job more difficult? "Not at all. For the vast majority of games it's just the same now as it was before," replies Rignall. "I still believe that if you're an experienced reviewer you can tell almost immediately whether or not a game is any good. The absolute fundamentals of a game are still pretty much the same now as they were back then. They might have better cosmetics, more levels and so on, but it still ultimately comes down to whether or not the game is fun, and fun is something that you can get a feel for the second you start playing. Some journalists feel they can only offer an opinion after they've played the game all the way through, like it's their duty to the game to see 100 per cent of it before being able to offer an opinion. Personally, I never had the patience for that. If I'm not having fun, I'll stop and go and play something that's fun all the way through. I guess the difference is that I review the experience the game gives, and some people review the entire game. It's a subtle but important distinction: neither is right nor wrong, they are just different styles of reviewing."

Penn concurs: "You could argue that a game that requires perseverance doesn't deserve perseverance. A film might require a minimum of a single viewing to appreciate it – well, you at least need to know how it ends. An album doesn't necessarily need to be heard all the way through, but it's only an hour long, so why not? A book can take longer to read, but surely it shouldn't be so fragile as to be dependent on its ending, there should be sufficient richness throughout."

However, Davies doesn't envy the task facing today's videogame journalists. "I just don't think it's possible for reviewers to be thorough with their reviews with the epic titles that are now being created," he says. "Even something like *Street Fighter IV* requires such expert knowledge because there's so much history behind it, and the need to provide a definitive answer. Or a game such as *Last Remnant*, quite possibly a rewarding

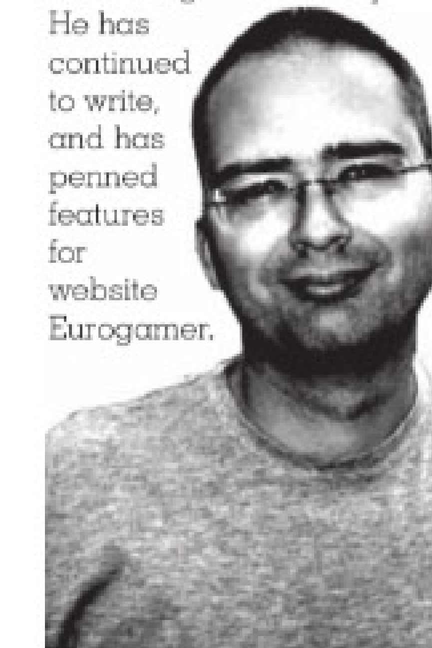


A young Richard Leadbetter gets to grips with a presumably exciting new Amiga release.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

RICHARD LEADBETTER

Since leaving EMAP, Leadbetter helped establish the UK operation of publisher Computec and now runs his own high-definition studio called Digital Foundry, which provides cutting-edge assets to a wide range of clients in the videogame industry. He has continued to write, and has penned features for website Eurogamer.



Classic Magazine Timeline

NOVEMBER 1981
COMPUTER & VIDEO GAMES



FEBRUARY 1984
CRASH



APRIL 1984
BIG K



MAY 1985
ZZAP! 64



JANUARY 1986
YOUR SINCLAIR



JUNE 1986
FAMITSU



OCTOBER 1987
ACE



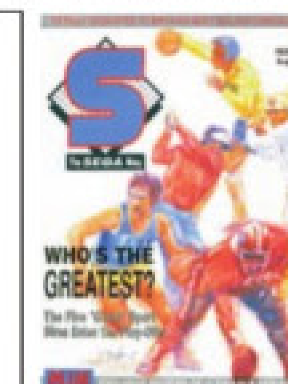
OCTOBER 1987
THE GAMES MACHINE



SUMMER 1989
ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY



DECEMBER 1989
SEGA POWER/ S: THE SEGA MAG



OCTOBER 1990
MEAN MACHINES



MAY 1991
AMIGA POWER




The 1989 European Videogame championship winning team – including Rignall, Glancey and a fresh-faced Stuart Campbell.

experience in the long-run but reviewers had to react to the presentation shortcomings and comment on these as fundamental faults, because who's going to spend 40 hours getting to the end to see if it changes your life?"

Advancements of gaming design and the maturing of the core audience aside, the biggest revolution in the realm of journalism over the past decade has been the arrival of the internet. Gone are the days when a print magazine could confidently claim it had the 'scoop' on a particular news story; the instant nature of internet-based publishing means that as soon as the news is out there, it's accessible.

"Exclusives were exclusives back in the day," recalls Rignall. "It required a lot of leg-work, phoning people up, developing and cultivating relationships to get them, but once we had an exclusive secured, it was ours. These days, thanks to the web, virtually nothing is exclusive, or at least not for longer than a few hours, and that definitely makes it tougher to stand out." Leadbetter expands on this.

"In terms of getting stories, the lack of the internet as a medium meant that we tended to get all the information first-hand from the people who really mattered in the industry," he explains. "Press releases as such didn't really happen. On the rare occasions they did turn up, we threw them in the bin – they'd be writing about games we'd already played. I'd say that, in the vast majority of cases, the internet has probably generated more lazy writing rather than 'easy' journalism." Penn agrees. "In the days before the internet, you knew people and you knew shit," he says. "You just had to know everyone and everything, who did what and when. There were no short cuts."

One of the most valuable 'short cuts' that the internet provides is the ability to contact people in a wide range of ways, rather than relying on the telephone or face-to-face meetings. "Back in the day, you seemed to spend most of your life on the phone to PRs or developers, instead of just dropping emails and instant messages," recalls Les Ellis, stalwart of *Sega Pro*, *Gamesmaster* and *C&VG*. This personal touch meant that a tighter connection would often flourish between the two parties. "We had closer relationships with the UK-based PR people, and would be trusted with information regarding future releases," remembers Davies. "We would plan months in advance, then follow up on developments by telephone or in the pub." Journalists would also have to try a lot harder when it came to securing valuable assets, too. "We had to be like Olympic athletes, carrying around bags full of flyers and promotional items," continues Davies. "It was a revelation when we started to get assets on CD, let alone via email."

Obtaining information from overseas was also a challenge. "We used to spend a fortune every month getting the Japanese mags translated for stories," says Dean Mortlock, ex-editor of *Sega Power*. "It was fun though, and there was always an enormous amount of satisfaction from sneaking in some exclusive shots at the twelfth hour." Speaking of screenshots, Ellis painfully recalls the days before powerful computers and online data transfer become commonplace.

"Storing assets was more important then as you couldn't just fire up Google and find a screenshot," he recalls. However, the vast amount of information available online these days can be a double-edged sword. "You now have a lot more at your fingertips, but you also face a lot of issues with whether the information out there is accurate or not," Ellis says.

Given the tools available to modern writers, has the online age brought with it a rise in quality? "Overall, the internet's definitely been good for standards, because anyone who's good can self-publish and build an audience by word of mouth, improving as they go, until they reach a point where they either get paid work or start making money from their own website," states Campbell. "The drawback is having to wade through an awful lot of crap before you find the good stuff, but there's plenty of it out there and it doesn't cost £6 to find out that something is just a glossy collection of press release rewrites and publisher-mouthpiece bullshit."

It's clear that the arrival of the internet has contributed to the harsh conditions being experienced by print media, but the mainstream adoption of gaming as a hobby has presented other issues to contend with. "Time was when *Zzap! 64* was fighting *Commodore User* to get the scoop, write the definitive review and build the biggest ABC," says Paul Glancey, another *Zzap! 64* and EMAP veteran, who now works for Disney Interactive. "Now the whole business has gone mainstream, you're up against the games column in *FHM* and *Time Magazine*. Not only do you have more competition from the popular press, you're also working with top-flight PR staff from vast publicly owned entertainment corporations. It's not like you're on the phone to a guy who runs off cassettes in his bedroom any more."

The internet has also revolutionised the way in which new talent enters the videogame journalism arena. It gives writers a platform to produce and promote their work, and as an entry point into the industry it is simply essential. "Now, anyone can have a crack at game journalism," comments former *Computer & Video Games* staffer Rob Swan. "There are so many avenues of approach online that the proverbial door has been smashed clean off its hinges." Indeed, it has never been easier to get a foothold in the industry, if that's your aim. The fanzines of the early-Nineties – so often a vital platform upon which prospective writers could showcase their talents – have been replaced by blogs and fan sites.

However, in ditching paper and Pritt-Stick for HTML and Flash coding, the impact is arguably far more effective. "Almost everything I read about videogames these days is on the internet and it can be pretty difficult to tell the professional sites from the fan sites," comments Glancey. "If I was 18 again that would definitely be my shot at getting into this business." It's clear that the journalists of the past would have had a field day had they been given the apparatus of the online age. "Now is an unprecedented time," says Penn. "The means of expression are broader, cheaper, more accessible and more usable than ever before. Not only can you do anything in any media, you can also be seen and appreciated by the world. I envy anyone who has the time and energy to exploit that."

However, although it's easier to find a route into videogame journalism, does it necessarily mean that we'll be seeing people enter the industry who might not have been given the chance 15 or 20 years ago? "Great journalists are still great journalists," says Rignall. "All the internet has done is give an entry point to any hopeful person who wants to be a game reviewer – good, bad or indifferent. At the end of the day, whether you were working in the Eighties or you're working now, the playfield is largely the same for everyone, and success still comes down to using talent and creativity to leverage whatever's out there in the most interesting and innovative way."

THE INTERNET HAS GENERATED MORE LAZY WRITING THAN 'EASY' JOURNALISM

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
JULIAN RIGNALL

After a stint at Virgin Interactive, Rignall has worked for a wide range of companies Stateside and helped found IGN in 97. He's now back in videogame journalism as VP of content on US magazine GamePro.

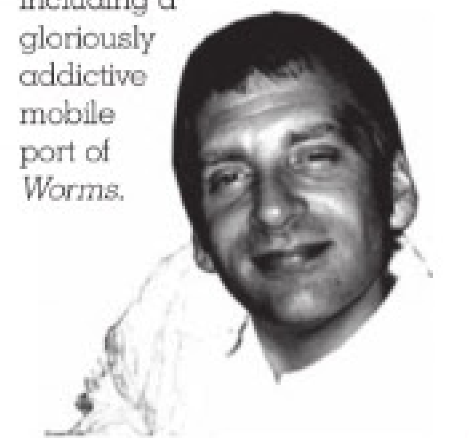
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
LES ELLIS

Ellis had been working on videogames magazines for more than a decade before he decided to make the jump into the big wide world of making games, rather than writing about them. Currently employed as production director at Eclipse Interactive, Ellis has overseen projects involving such major intellectual properties as *The Lord Of The Rings* and *Pirates Of The Caribbean*.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
ROB SWAN

Another convert from journalism to game design, *C&VG* veteran Swan now makes games for a living at Mnemonic Studios, where he's employed as lead artist/designer. He's developed several mobile games, including a gloriously addictive mobile port of *Worms*.





If only putting together a videogame magazine was more like this today…

Classic Magazine Timeline

NOVEMBER 1991 SEGA PRO



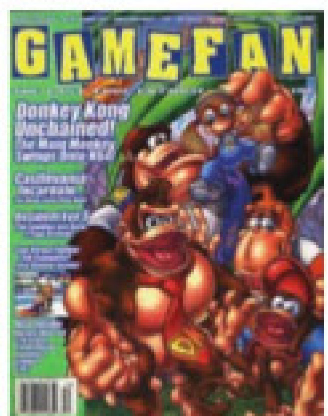
JANUARY 1992 SEGA FORCE



JANUARY 1992 TOTAL!



OCTOBER 1992 GAMEFAN



OCTOBER 1992 NINTENDO MAGAZINE SYSTEM

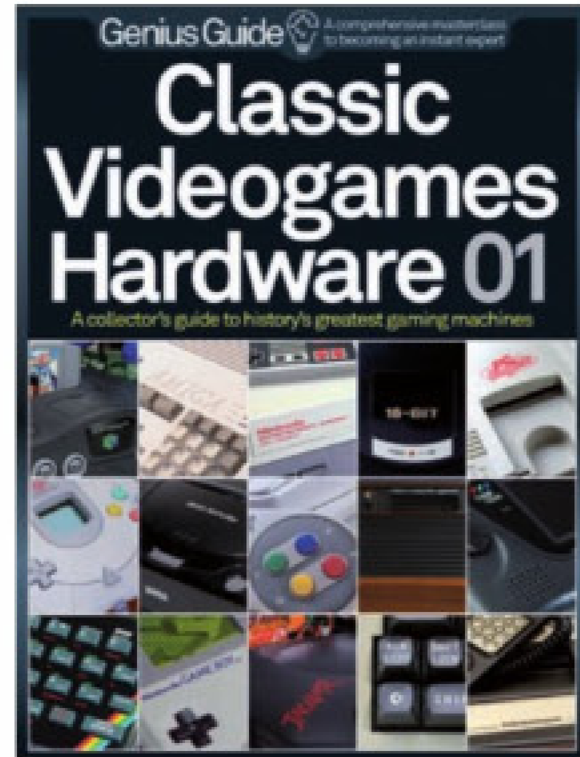


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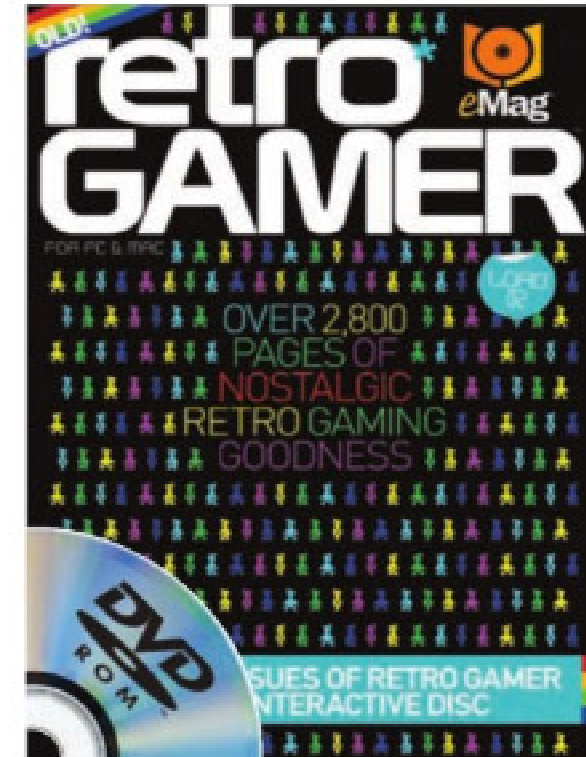
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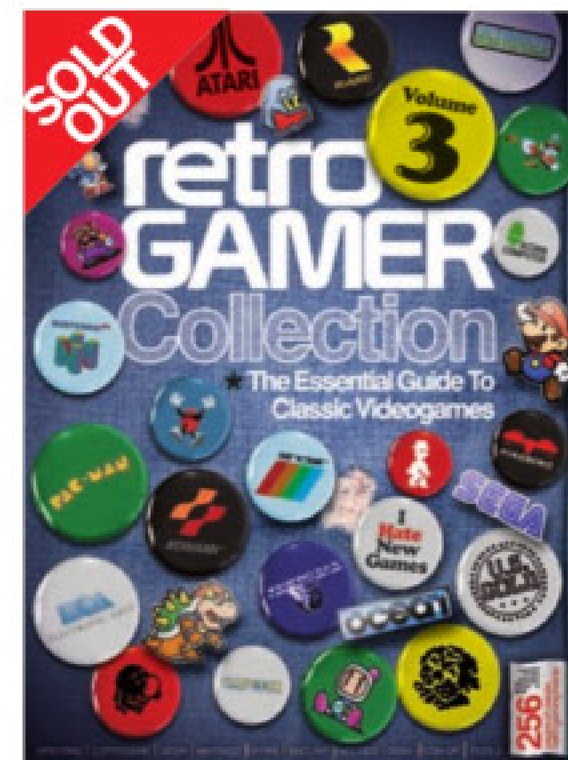
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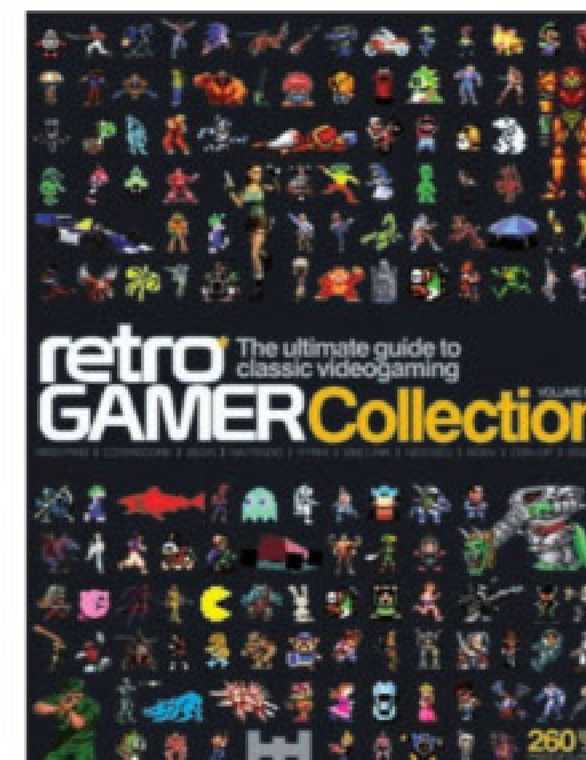
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